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BEGGARS ALL

A Novel

BY

L. DOUGALL

"Yes, here in this poor hampered Actual wherein thou even now standest, here or nowhere is thy ideal."—CARLYLE

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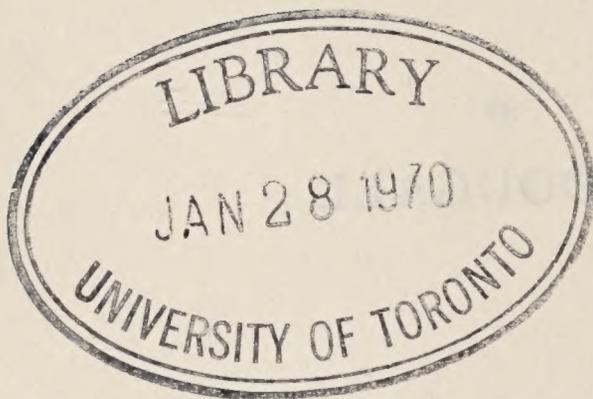
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BEGGARS ALL

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TO
J. E. D.,
WHOSE WISDOM HAS TAUGHT MANY THAT
THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE
IS NOT
THE TREE OF LIFE.

MELBOURNE, DERBYSHIRE,
January, 1891.



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BEGGARS ALL.

CHAPTER I.

IN one of the western counties of England there is a flat-topped hill. It rises to west and north with precipitate sides from the plain, whose tilled land is dappled with the habitations of men. On this plain, as far as eye can see, are larger and smaller collections of roofs, from farmstead to city; but the top of the hill is a lonesome moorland. A long, white road stretches across it, leading from the village of Croom, on the eastern slope, to a town at the western base.

The wind was wild on a dull March afternoon when a man walked on this road from Croom and came to the brink of the hill overlooking the town. On this edge of the moor a line of stunted larches, gray and one-sided, bent with the gale; and below, where the road dipped, was a niggardly fir wood, which swayed with a sound like rushing water. Some rocks on a beetling brow further over had slipped and fallen; beneath them there was a quarry which laid bare the stony heart of earth.

Underneath stood an old town, with a new town added to it. The old town was on a ridge which was a

low spur of the hill; its parish church and old-world roofs, thus raised, were conspicuous. Beyond them a new town had spread itself and crept all round, circling the older part with an arm of newer houses. It seemed a prosperous place, and the time-worn lines of the buildings on the ridge gave it stateliness of aspect.

Far and wide the plain stretched cold, swept by the wind. White smoke, rising from chimneys, was chased this way and that. The town lay like a thing which God had helped man to build, so much a part of nature it seemed, grouped according to the contour of the land, matched in colour to the leaden sky and the scarred face of the rocky hill.

When one looks down upon a busy centre of life from a solitary place the situation gives objective reality to the attitude the spirit of man must often take as it looks out upon the haunts and doings of himself and his fellows. The man who had now crossed the hill loitered in a mood of contemplation. He was middle-aged, stout, and of common appearance.

Here in the fir wood the road divided and a signpost, giving insufficient explanation of the division, stood with extended arms, like a white cross. The stranger stood with his fat hands clasped behind his ample back and almost a beseeching look upon his broad, uncomely face. He looked at the town, the sky, at the perplexing division of his road—one could hardly tell at what he was looking. There was strength underlying the entreaty on his face: entreaty is not necessarily weak.

He evidently thought himself quite alone as far as his kind were concerned, for there came from him an

audible breathing of the emotion within him. It seemed to take the form of a psalm or prayer; at least, there was something about the greatness of God's pity and power in his whispered monotone, the spasmodic utterance of which seemed to give him relief and refreshment.

He was not alone. Among the firs above the quarry there were two shanties, habitable, but looking, at first sight, like the rest of the place, deserted. In the doorway of one a young man stood, and from that niche of observation watched the newcomer with that minute interest which an alert mind in idle moments often bestows upon a novel object. His interest, or a feeling of honour in making his observation apparent, drew him out on the road. He was young; lighter, quicker everyway, than the other. As he emerged his face wore that curious mask of impenetrability which sensitive men can assume when they wish to hide that they have caught another in what to them would have been a mortifying lapse of self-control.

They were strangers, and they talked as strangers do, beginning with desultory remarks, entering into dialogue of question and answer.

It was a couple of miles to the town, the young man said, by either road round the hill, but there was a short, steep path through the quarry. He was rambling for pleasure; he did not mind going home now and showing that way. It was a beastly day, anyway—this as a further blast of the wild, cold wind struck the hill and the men and the fir trees—not a good day for a walk, but what else could a fellow do on such a holiday?

“Is it a holiday?” asked the other absently.

The reply was laconic. “Good Friday.”

“Ah, so it is.” The stout man seemed still more absent for a minute; his mind seemed to wander with his glance beyond the old post, with its cross piece, to the distant sky. He recalled himself and spoke. The voice was pleasant; there was a ring of simple honesty in it. “I have been travelling for some days.”

“A walking tour?” There was something in the question which indicated disbelief in the suggestion—a swift, curious glance from the young man’s eyes which was past before the man of heavier make would have had time to begin to meet it.

“I am not in a position to take a pleasure tour. I have only walked from Croom Junction. I am looking for a poor woman whom I have traced here from London.”

“I am in the news line. I am a reporter for the *Evening Journal*. My name is Kent.”

“My name is Gilchrist. I am going to try to get a situation in some gentleman’s service.”

The extreme simplicity of this reply caused Kent to look with more open curiosity.

“I told you my name and what I do because I thought I might help you to find whoever you want. About things that go on, you know, I know—well, almost everything.”

It was not an exultant boast, if boast it was. The weather and the place were not such as to inspire high spirits. All was dull and bleak. Gilchrist made as if to sit down by the roadside. His movements were those of a very tired man. His face looked heavy with

fatigue. Kent glanced at him with a light, good-natured pity.

“Come into this cabin. It belongs to a friend of mine.”

He did not look as if he would be on intimate terms with the inhabitant of such a shanty; he seemed *almost* a gentleman—this young townsman; but a man seeks a rude cabin as shelter from weather almost involuntarily and without much question of invitation. Gilchrist went in at the open door to which he was pointed.

He found himself in a one-roomed dwelling, fitted up with tolerable comfort. That which surprised him was that, after he had seated himself near the fire at Kent's invitation, he discovered the friend alluded to, stretched on a low pallet, asleep. He looked like a young man somewhat withered and prematurely grey. He slept on like a baby.

Kent stood between them and introduced the sleeping to the waking man. There was veiled comedy in his manner. Perhaps he had been amused at the simplicity of Gilchrist's self-introduction, and supposed him too stupid to perceive his mockery.

“My friend whom you see asleep is called Montagu the lamplighter. Montagu was, for unknown reasons, entered as his name on the Orphanage register when he was a baby, and he was there brought up to the task of lighting street lamps. He sleeps by day because, what with lighting the lamps and putting them out, he runs about half the night.”

“He has faith in humanity to sleep with his door open.”

Kent was blowing the embers of the fire. He gave

again a furtive glance of curiosity. The form of words struck him as unnatural in a servant. Yet he would have staked his reputation for shrewdness on the assertion that Gilchrist was truthful.

“He doesn’t leave it open, but he lets me open it from the outside. He and I are old chums; we began life in the same orphanage together.” He coaxed the fire into flame, and began searching for means to make tea. “He and I are the products of modern philanthropy. He was half-witted, so they trained him to light lamps; I was sharp, and they gave me schooling.” Kent made tea without milk. He was deft with his hands. “We will each leave a penny on the table; that will pay,” he said.

Gilchrist rose and went to the bed, looking down with kind curiosity in his expression.

“I was sharp and they gave me schooling,” repeated Kent. “They put me through the Board School, and I got on. There is just one thing in all the Christian philanthropy nowadays that is worth giving and receiving—that is education.”

“Yes, if it is the right sort.”

When they came out Kent shut the door behind him. Putting a bit of twisted wire into the rude lock, he tried to push back the bolt. Gilchrist asked further questions about the lamplighter as he watched the operation with interest.

“Bother it!” Kent was poking with his wire, and could not make the bolt slide. “A professional house-breaker would do it with dexterity, I suppose, or have better implements.” Then, succeeding at last, he answered the questions in better humour. “Oh yes,

he'll wake when the sun goes down and it's time to go his rounds, as sure as a church clock, and he'll sleep till then unless the crack o' doom wakes him. He goes by habit as a clock by springs—he *goes*, he doesn't live. He is a character."

They clambered down by the edge of the quarry-pit to the broad, beaten surface of a high road running into the town from the south. An old house, labelled "Orphanage," stood in trim, uninteresting grounds. Gilchrist was surprised to come upon it so suddenly.

"Is this the place you spoke of?"

Kent's regard turned on the place to which the question directed his attention with the look a man might bestow upon some monster which, in spite of familiarity, had power to excite wonder as well as disgust.

"The same," he said; "and they trained Montagu to go from here to his lamps, and from his lamps here, till he couldn't get out of the habit, so he lives above there."

"They were kind, I suppose. Authorized cruelty is out of date."

"Kind?" He shrugged his arms. "As kind as one can be to a *batch* of anything. They brought us up in batches; but Montagu had the worst of it, for he had to stay a long time before he was sufficiently wound up to go by himself."

They walked between fields where garden stuff was grown in summer. Further on, the side of a small park, which belonged to a private house, skirted the road. That passed, the town began by an outstanding row of small, brick cottages.

Kent gave information idly when he felt inclined. The land, he said, grew remarkably good strawberries.

The house in the park had been empty for years; it was said to be haunted by the ghost of a baby.

“A baby!”

“Yes; floats through the air in long clothes, I believe, and yells.” The tone implied great contempt for such superstitions. “It is said some one left a foundling at the door, mistaking the house for the Orphanage. The owner wouldn’t take it in, so it died. The ghost resulted.” Some paces further along the road he added, “An old man named Gower, from India, is going to buy the place, they say.”

Gilchrist straightened himself. “I am going to see an invalid gentleman of that name.”

“Just come home from India, gouty, has a daughter unmarried—not young, rather pretty, arranges penny readings, and that sort of thing?” Kent’s items of interest were a long interrogation.

“There is one lady in the house—a niece, I believe.”

“‘Miss Marian Gower’ is the name on the charity lists. She’s been taking a header into benevolence since they came here. You may depend it’s the same people.”

When they came to the first tavern a blue omnibus stood before it, just about to start on its route further into the town. Gilchrist caught it by hastening his steps. As the heavy vehicle jolted away, Kent walked up the pavement in the same direction. He tried not to follow Gilchrist’s bulky form with too evident curiosity in his eyes. He was conscious of that awkward sensation which a naturalist feels when some new specimen escapes him before it is classified, and he, remembering its peculiarities, fails entirely to imagine to what class it may belong.

The omnibus went on to the end of its journey. The stopping place was at the old parish church. There Gilchrist, alighting, looked about him as strangers look at such old town centres. On all sides there were stone pavements, old walls, high antique roofs. Gilchrist, turning instinctively from the thoroughfare, sought a square pavement, upon which the main door of the church opened—a lounging place, where old elm trees stood up in the flagstones and horses and wheels might not come. Opposite the church stood a block of buildings, put up by some ambitious merchant of a past generation who had built his own name, in the possessive case, in large stone letters upon its upper wall. “Babbit’s” was the name of this building; but Babbit was dead and his business had vanished, and, like a sign of the times, his place of merchandise had been rebuilt inside and converted into a Board school. Ugly, dingy, and square its walls looked; the March wind shrieked as its blast fell against it. The elm trees also rattled, and the church tower seemed to shiver with cold. The wind had full sweep here, as on the hill, for the third side of the pavement ended only with a ailing and the top of a stone stair which descended to the streets of the lower level.

By this staircase the stranger went down into the more fashionable squares and roads of the new town.

CHAPTER II.

MARIAN GOWER sat in an overhanging window that looked out on the parade. The waxen flowers of Easter week had come up in the little garden strip; snowdrop and crocus seemed to sleep, folded in their own cool breath. It was that hour when we notice that spring days have grown long because twilight does not come when we look for it. In all the air there was the wonderful impulse of life that holds the promise of budding leaves and nesting birds. Here even, on the fashionable parade, the impulse of the spring pervaded, giving birth in young minds to new thoughts, new hopes, and in older hearts reviving dreams of time gone by. The ladies on the pavement wore new bonnets, and the men had something fresh in their attire. Earth was keeping holiday, and the people felt it and talked in neighbourly fashion. The World and his wife walked home arm in arm to dinner, their daughters wore violets, and their sons came near to inhale the fragrance. Something stirred within Marian's heart. Marian was forty, and she sat alone.

A woman, with a baby in her arms, stood under the window to beg. She was ragged, dirty, and had an ignoble face.

"For God's sake, help me, dear lady," she moaned.

Marian sighed, turned away, and forgot the beggar.

That which stirred in her heart with the movement of the spring was a great longing, an overwhelming

desire for some mind with whom she could have fellowship; with whom she could exchange her thoughts, saying, "That girl has a pretty face;" "These flowers are fair;" "The air is sweet;" for what pleasure is there in noting beauty unless there is some other to see it with us, some one who can see exactly wherein beauty consists for us?

Yet this feeling of loneliness in Marian's heart was not mingled with visions of any past love story. She was too nice-minded to have imagined romance where it had not existed. Lovely, intelligent, and well-bred, this lady had passed her youth without once coming into such sympathy with any man that the steadfast fire which burns on the altar of every good woman's heart could leap up and glow, even for a transient moment, in her eyes as she looked into his. She sympathized with women, not with men; she did not like men. She had known some kinds of friendship. In that woman's school-world where women teach and girls are taught she had laboured for years and known varied companionships; that had its pleasures, but now——

"Marian." A nervous invalid spoke in fretful tones from the inner part of the room. "Who or what is that whining?"

She rose instantly, with that involuntary gesture of service that becomes habitual to one living as an attendant.

"A beggar woman, uncle."

"Send her away."

"I have shaken my head at her."

"Give her sixpence."

"It is wrong to give to beggars. Do you want me to

be haunted by the fear that in the next world this poor creature may come and accuse me of helping her in a downward course?"

"I don't want anything of the sort." He spoke with a suppressed rage, as if she had seriously accused him. "Shut the window, and tuck my rug round me."

"Lady, sweet lady, be kind, for God's dear sake," moaned the beggar beneath the window.

Marian, putting down the sash, arranged the rug more gently and more efficiently because of the words she had heard.

The fretful old man looked at her with strange impatience in his eyes.

"I'd like you a great deal better if you had a bit of the devil in you," he said.

"You think so."

"I tell you I should."

"I think not. You are always turning away your servants, and, according to you, they have all some of that ingredient in them. I should not like to be turned away."

He gave a lurch, disarranging the rug. "Being ill-tempered to you is just like sticking pins in a pin-cushion, than which nothing is more aggravating; it receives them without emitting a shriek, like St. Sebastian in the pictures."

Marian had lived long enough to observe that conscious kindness is only the imitation of love. She did not pride herself on her patience.

"And yet," she said, "if people will spend their time sticking pins, I do not see but that, for the good of society, they must be supplied with something to receive

them noiselessly. If the man of the pins were furnished with a live pig, for instance, the neighbours might object."

The uncle laughed hoarsely. The idea of the pig's objections gave him a moment's distraction.

"What business is it of yours if I do change my servants?" he growled.

"None."

"But you think it is. You think that because I sent that fellow away at a day's notice I was cruel—eh? But I wasn't, as it happens, for he got a quarter's pay for nothing."

"Your last choice seems to me a very curious one," she replied, with anxious lingering on the words. "He does not act as servants do. Do you think he is quite in his right mind?"

She knew by the knowledge that comes of long habit that the mere fact of making the suggestion would be enough to provoke its contradiction, but she was surprised at the sudden strength of the answer.

"I don't know, I'm sure, but I know this—he's more in his right mind than I am."

In the dusk of the room the dissipated old man lay, stretched out in a sort of gaudy magnificence, under Eastern rugs, and the slight woman, in white evening dress, bent over him.

Just then Gower's new servant came into the room, walking clumsily. He brought Marian a letter, and lit a lamp that she might read it.

Gower fretted. "You needn't do this sort of thing. Gilchrist, you know; it isn't your work."

The servant stood to listen, his hand on the door.

"No," he agreed; "but I thought I might as well."

He went out.

Marian stood near the light to read her letter. A written chat from a governess friend was the most lively communication she had reason to expect. But the entertainment might be less—the letter might prove an advertisement or a bill.

“What is it?” asked the uncle. Perhaps one of his most provoking habits was a constant curiosity about affairs in which he took not the slightest interest when they were explained to him.

“I don’t understand.” Marian stood with a puzzled face.

“Eh?” sharply, as if her perplexity were an offence.

“The envelope is from some shipping company in Liverpool; it has the company’s stamp on the back.”

“Well, isn’t the letter from the same place?”

“No—yes; that is, there is a note from a clerk. He says, ‘The enclosed letter was not received at our office in time to be delivered on board the ship as requested,’ and here is a letter addressed to ‘B. Tod, Esq., Passenger from New York to Liverpool by ss. *Delaware*.’”

“And who is ‘B. Tod’?” asked the old man, with a disagreeable elevation of his eyebrows. But his attention was already returning to his gouty legs. With a bad pain in one’s legs, and an habitual selfishness in one’s heart, it is difficult to keep up more than a momentary interest in anything.

Marian had lifted her head with an evident sentiment of indignation.

“I never heard the name of Tod. I never knew there was such a ship, or such a line of ships.”

“Send it back, and say it’s a mistake.”

“But why have they sent it to me? Where have they got my address? It is addressed to my full name, and to your care.”

Some minutes elapsed—he suffering, thinking only of his pain; she twisting the letter in her hands, striving to get hold of some clue of thought which might afford a possible explanation.

At length he turned again with some reviving interest. “What does Tod’s correspondent say?”

“The letter is not open.”

A flicker of deeper curiosity crossed his face. “Open it, and see what is in it.”

“I will not open it. It is no affair of mine.” There was a certain scorn in her decision.

Gilchrist came into the room again with his master’s medicine. He seemed uneasy and shuffled about, drawing down the window blinds.

“I am going out,” he said to Marian, without using any title of respect that would have seemed natural to her ear. “If you have letters I will take them.”

She went to her desk. Enclosing the letter to the unknown Tod in a fresh envelope, she directed it to the office whence it came. She wrote a line with it quickly, haughtily, as if the supposed acquaintance were an insult. “Miss Gower knows nothing of the enclosed letter or of the Mr. Tod to whom it is addressed.”

When he was gone she felt the reaction from the momentary excitement. The weariness of the friendless monotony of her life rushed back on her consciousness like a current of cold air where the atmosphere has been heated. She almost wished she had read the letter; it might, at least, have supplied a bit of human interest

coming nearer than the printed page, and offering more entertainment than the practical page of daily life. In her idleness she walked again to the window and looked through the blind.

“It must have been a mere mistake. Perhaps they meant to send us some advertisement, and the clerk enclosed the wrong thing.” She said this a little vaguely to her uncle.

“Clerks *invariably* do the wrong thing,” he assented.

For a moment Marian was beguiled into an amusing reverie as to what the state of affairs would be in the world if this statement were true.

The Easter moon was rising in the twilight over the gray town. Trees in the square across the parade formed a screen of budding twigs, so that she could only dimly see the parish church on the old town hill which rose beyond. There was a lull in the passing; the World and his family had gone in to dinner; the parade was quiet. Gilchrist went out with the letter, and she watched him, idly wondering what good this spring-time, or other spring-times, could bring to her—to her who had everything she wanted except the impulse of joy of which the spring air told. She felt at that moment that she would gladly have gone about begging for it from door to door, as the ragged woman begged, if she could have hoped any one would give it to her.

That same woman stood, still whining, some way down the pavement. Marian knew her cant so well she almost fancied she heard her words.

“Ah, dear heart, be kind, for the dear Lord’s sake.”

She saw Gilchrist stop and speak to the woman.

Marian watched, and did not feel kindly toward him. A certain determination of suspicion was born in her heart toward the new servant.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN Gilchrist stopped by the beggar-woman she was standing with her back to him. He laid a light finger for an instant on her shoulder.

“Whose baby is that?”

She turned with a start. Her whine ceased. “Is it you?” she gasped in an awed whisper.

“Yes. Whose baby is that?”

“Where did you come from?” Her dazed wits seemed incapable of the effort she was making to collect her ideas. Instead of answering him, or waiting for his answer, she broke again into her habitual whimper. “For the love of heaven, don’t be hard on me, Tom.”

“Don’t,” he said. “I found you had come here, and I have followed you. I know that you picked up the child on the way.”

“I borrowed it from a woman I met; she had six, and a drunken man. It helps to keep me warm as I carry it, and it’s a sight better for it to be with me, and,” whimpering again, “I kind of like to hug and kiss it, Tom; it comforts me best, next to the drink.”

Her gray hair blew untidily over her unlovely face. She did not look womanly; the dignity of her soul seemed soiled and tattered like her garments, yet she

had this left—that, when he brushed aside the shawl to look at the child, she strained the little head to her breast and kissed it fondly. They stood in mingled moonlight and gaslight. Gilchrist watched her narrowly. Strange to say, the child looked healthy enough and not wholly uncared for.

“You never give it a drop?” he asked.

She steadied her voice to answer. “On your honour, no, Tom.”

“Nor let it fall when you can’t walk straight?”

“It would be worse off at home, Tom; on your honour, it would.” Again she broke into her whine.

“Don’t take it from me, Tom; it’s all the bit of love I’ve got, and I walked from London just to see——”

He lowered his voice, but spoke steadily, “To see Gower.”

She stood stupidly, crying a little, as if from habit. “I only wanted just to look at him.”

“Silvia.”

“Yes, Tom.”

“I don’t know what you may have wanted of Gower, but you will get nothing from him. I have told him that you are provided for. I am going to stay with him as his servant in order to be near you if you need help. Do you hear? do you understand?”

“I’ll never come and disgrace *you*, Tom, I’m sure; I bless you every day of my life. For the love of God——”

“Stop.”

She stopped so suddenly that the whine, the sound of which he had checked, was still written on her features.

“You got my message?” he said. “You are in the room I arranged for you to have, and you get good food every day?”

“Yes, thank you, Tom.” But her face spoke an unspeakable discontent.

“I’ll let you have milk for the child if you want to keep it a few weeks.”

“I can make enough to get it that.”

“Is it no use, even yet, my entreating you to give up this begging?”

“I’d just break out again, Tom; you know I would.”

“Well,” he said, as we say, “well,” meaning to denote our helplessness to alter ill. Then, in a minute, “I am in Mr. Gower’s house; you can come there if you want me; remember that.” He spoke kindly, but with authority.

He was not young, but he looked younger than she did by a good many years.

“Good night,” he said.

He went on, and she followed him down the pavement and across the square. When he reached a letter-box he put in Marian’s letter and returned. The beggar stepped aside, making way humbly for him to pass. She went on toward the old part of the town.

Between the hill on which the old town stood and the fashionable square lay a number of short streets of intermediate respectability. Into one of these the beggar turned, and, entering a tenement house, she knocked at a room on the ground floor.

“I’m cold and tired, dear lady.” She began her whine almost before the door was opened. “For the love of Heaven, let me in to sit down a bit.”

The woman who opened the door was elderly and very feeble, with the blight of some fatal disease upon her, a motherly woman of quiet aspect.

The beggar came into the yellow gaslight and shut the door.

There are many good women who preserve a certain sternness of dignity toward all except their own dear ones and little children. The mistress of this room was one of these. Standing bowed feebly, as if with the weight of her own weakness upon her shoulders, she looked at the beggar with grave benevolence. The intent to do good was evident on the saintly face, but not the passion of love. The beggar used no words, but lifted the baby from beneath her shawl and held it towards the other. Then the flash of love leaped out of the faded eyes.

The baby made up a face to cry. With all the tender wiles that only one whose vocation in life has been motherhood knows, the elder woman took it in her arms and comforted its fears.

It was not very easily pacified. The fresh air and motion of walking had kept it quiet for hours, but now the light and heat of the room roused it thoroughly.

One gas-jet lit the room, which was fairly large but very bare, unless the atmosphere of love and spiritual beauty, which was apparent to those capable of seeing, might be said to furnish the space within the blank walls. A meagre fire flicked its light on some cooking utensils. Near it was a couch, on which a bedridden girl lay helpless. A larger bed in the corner, a table, some chairs, and travelling boxes, were all else that the room contained.

The maudlin beggar sat near the door, feeling stupefied by heat and rest. The girl on the couch watched with bright, restless eyes, as her mother exerted all her feeble strength to dandle the crying child.

"Mother," she said, "at your age you really ought to be able to see a baby without wanting to nurse it. You ought to have got over your weakness for babies."

She did not say, "You are too ill to waste your strength in such work." Illness was one of the sad facts of daily life which was never mentioned between these two.

The mother made a little mess of bread, hot water, and sugar, and fed the baby till it cooed with satisfaction.

"Such a tiny morsel of bread. It cannot be wrong to give it away," she said in an undertone. The baby evidently did not think it wrong.

"If I thought Star would not come for a while I'd wash it," she said, again looking at the baby, while she spoke, with a coaxing smile.

"Star cannot come till nine, mother; it is not long after eight."

The operation of the baby's bath was commenced. With slow and feeble step the delicate lady made sundry journeys across the room. A basin, a towel, a rag, were brought to the fore. Warm water was supplied from the kettle. She seemed to become quite blithe in her work.

"The soap can hardly be said to cost anything," she remarked to her daughter.

The beggar still sat stupidly by the door. The mother seated herself very near her daughter's couch, and they exchanged low confidences with each other

over the baby's toilet. They agreed that the beggar kept the child more carefully than she kept herself; that it was not very dirty; that it was a healthy, well made babe; that the beggar was not so tipsy as she had been on a former visit; and that her speech betrayed the fact that she had seen better days. Then they forgot to talk, and the mother occupied herself only with that language of cooing smiles in which babies and their lovers converse with one another.

The little naked boy sprawled upon her knee, playing with his own freshly washed limbs, crowing at the firelight and at his nurse's smiles. This woman was nearly sixty; she might have been much older, so worn and feeble she looked. She had never possessed beauty's physical part; yet, whoever had once seen the soul of beauty, would have recognized it again in her face. It did not lie in the smooth silver hair; nor in the loving depth of faded gray eyes; nor in the lines of the withered face, which spoke of purpose, love, and constancy; nor yet in the smile that came, like the reflection of long, inward joy, to greet the baby's new-born laughter. Not in any of these, although they were pleasant to see; but pervading them all there was something—something which men, seeing long ago in the faces of some of their fellows, tried to portray on canvas by a golden glory round the head.

The cripple girl watched them both with shining, observant eyes.

“Oh, mother,” she exclaimed suddenly, “the baby has just begun to live in this weary world, and you have gone through all the sorrow that heart can feel, yet your smile is brighter.”

“What are you saying, love?” The mother looked up from the baby, having taken in nothing of what the girl had said.

“Nothing; it does not matter.”

The interruption reminded her to dress the baby, and, with many sweet words and little nursery chants, this feat was accomplished. She took it back to the sleepy beggar, her face growing grave as she drew near.

“I hope you are rested,” she said with gentle dignity. “I wish I could offer you a cup of tea, but”—here a slight pause and an inward sigh—“I am as poor a woman as yourself, inasmuch as I am obliged to live on the charity of others. I have no right to give anything away.”

Some dormant sense of righteousness struggled to the surface of the besotted mind.

“Heaven bless you, ma’am. I don’t know what’s given me the habit of coming here, unless it’s to let the child see your sweet face. It’s not to ask for food or money I came, and I don’t know why you let the like of me inside your door.”

The other hesitated. She felt that some word of exhortation or comfort ought to be given here; but, although she belonged to that class of religious people who believe verbal preaching to be a part of every one’s duty, it was a part which always came as a trial to her.

At last she said, but with exceeding diffidence and modesty, “You asked to come in for the love of Heaven.”

The words represented nothing to the beggar’s mind except the memory of her own cant, and at that she

began to whimper and cant again as, taking the baby she shuffled out.

The towel and the rag that were used for the baby's bath were washed out with tired, trembling hands. When the room was put in order again it was a very weary woman who sat down by her daughter's couch.

They clasped their hands together and seemed waiting for some one's advent. Many steps passed the window, of which they took no notice. At last they both stirred with certain expectation. There was one footfall that they knew a long way off.

"Star is coming," they said to each other, and smiled.

CHAPTER IV.

ESTHER THOMPSON came into the low room where her mother and crippled sister waited. Esther worked in a shop. She was just such a young woman as one might pass in the street without notice; but every human soul has individuality, and she had hers.

"How is my mother?" There was a pretty importance in her tone. "Star wants to know how her mother is. Here have I been thirteen mortal hours without hearing how she is."

She had tripped now into the room, shutting out all melancholy as she shut the door upon the night air bringing with her the ease of mirth. If it cost her an effort, no one could have seen it. Coming to where the two were together, she touched the mother's chin lightly

with her hands, turning the thin face up so that she could read its tale.

All signs of mind weariness vanished from the two invalids. The mother lifted her eyes with fervour of satisfied love in them; the cripple raised herself a little on the couch, and seemed to prepare for the pleasure of the day.

“Mother is tired,” said Star, reading the worn face. “And how is Cripple Dick?”

Richarda Thompson, thus grotesquely addressed, did not answer for herself.

“Mother has been washing babies.”

“Babies! Where did she get them?”

“There was only one; it belonged to that beggar. I hadn't the heart to stop her doing it, for it amused her.”

Star was still caressing her mother's face with her hand. “Oh, fie!” she said playfully, looking down into her eyes with inexpressible love and respect; “oh, fie! to wash a beggar-baby! Star does not allow such doings.” Then she knelt down for her evening's kiss.

“Mother,” she said.

“Daughter.”

In long, close embrace they fondled one another.

“Star,” said the cripple, “talk to us. It is so much nicer to talk than have supper. Say to us something quite new, that we have never thought of before. You always can.” Oh, the weariness, to an active mind, of long days without any income of fresh experience, with only misfortune to think upon! The cripple looked to her active sister as to one who had creative power. “You can always invent something new,” she repeated.

“So I can.” Star rose with perfect adaptation to her sister’s mood. “This evening,” she announced, “there is a topic of the utmost interest to be discussed.”

“Oh, Star, what is it?” Richarda’s eyes glistened with interest.

“Ah! well, just wait until I can decide; but, in the mean time, there is going to be a treat for supper.”

She had brought some fish, which she proceeded to fry. She went about her work with many flourishes of her pan, while she descanted on the freshness of the fish. She did not tell them that she had begged it very cheap of a kind fishmonger on the plea that it was Saturday night. Her face burned now as she thought of her hardihood, but she made great pretence that the tiny fire was too hot for her complexion.

Very delicate the fish was when it was cooked. There was a tiny scrap of parsley to lay on each piece. There was no butter for the bread, but it was cut thin as paper and toasted. A cup of cocoa without milk was supplied to each.

What a fine feast it was! They all said so many times, trying to cheat themselves and each other. The cripple could not sit up; the mother was too tired to leave her low chair. Star, attending to their wants, ate her supper sitting on the floor at her mother’s feet. She said it was the pleasantest way to take supper.

“Now!” Richarda spoke again.

Star was putting away the dishes. “Yes, there is a very important subject to discuss this evening, if I could only think what it is—— Oh,” as if she had suddenly remembered, “it is matrimonial advertisements.”

The mother became grave. Mothers are so quick to dread evil. The cripple put out her hand and touched her arm, as if begging sympathy in her own pleasure.

“Isn’t she funny, mother? Isn’t it wonderful how she always says the very most unexpected things? Well, Star, go on. I never thought of it before, but I perceive now that it is very important that we should all give our opinion on matrimonial advertisements this evening.”

“What put such a curious subject into your head, Esther?” This was the mother, hardly beguiled into a smile.

“Don’t you know, dearest, that when you have fish, and then cocoa, you always think of matrimony and advertisements next? It is natural association.”

“Of course, mother,” Richarda laughed.

“I don’t see the connection.”

“Don’t you, mother?” said Star soothingly. “In our shop Miss Sims trimmed a bonnet to-day that she said was lovely; and, when the girls asked her what was so lovely about it, she said that when people were not born to feel such things there was no use attempting to explain them.”

“The mother-bird ruffles her feathers at anything that suggests marriage,” said Richarda; “but it needn’t, for, you know, I am off the list, and Star——”

Star took up the word. “And Star, as you know, never has the chance of speaking to a man from one month’s end to another. Although, to be sure,” she added, with a little laugh, “that would make the resort to advertisement all the more necessary. How should we word it?—‘A young and penniless woman, so domesticated

that she would never think of leaving her mother and sister (both invalids), desires to correspond with a rich and good gentleman with a view to matrimony."

"Dear child!" said the mother. Then she fell into a reverie, in which the sorrows and joys of the past gave shape to possible events of the future.

Richarda put out her hand again, and pulled her sleeve. "Listen, mother; we are discussing. It opens new vistas to one's thoughts. Don't muse *now*, mother; be amused instead."

"My opinion is," said Star, "that there is no reason to consider it disgraceful. A moment ago we just happened by accident, as it were, upon a case of a very respectable young woman who would have no other way of becoming acquainted with men who might want to marry her."

"But would your young woman not cease to be respect-worthy the moment she advertised for lovers?" the mother asked in clear, quiet tones.

"Let us waive that point. Women don't make offers of marriage any way. But suppose a young man in the same friendless situation. Let us consider the case of a young man called X. X. knows no young women, except those of inferior sort. He has no friends to introduce him to any. He has to work day and evening, or he would lose his situation. He is lonely, and has just enough salary to support a thrifty wife. Why should he not advertise? Wouldn't many a nice girl be happier as his wife than toiling in some shop?"

"No nice girl would answer him," said the mother.

"But consider the case of X.," said Richarda. "It is interesting. I can shut my eyes and see him in his

lonely room. He blushes and trembles as he writes out the advertisement."

"It is more likely that he is sitting in a public-house, laughing over his supposed dupe with his boon companions."

"Hear the mother-bird!" exclaimed Star gaily. She sat down, and wound her arms round her mother. "She will fight it out to the end—won't she?—even if she is tired. She won't leave the wicked people who make such advertisements an atom of virtue to lean on—will she?"

"Not one in a hundred of such advertisements are genuine," said the mother.

"But," said Richarda slowly, "supposing that X."—and here it turned out that Richarda, lying with her eyes shut, had thought out the circumstances of X. minutely. It was clear from her account that, if he remained true to duty and honour, X. could do nothing else than advertise for a wife.

It was with zest that Richarda entered into the pleasures of the imagination in connection with the theme her sister had chosen for her, presumably at hazard. Esther's mind, although more fertile in suggestion, was never equal to such sustained flights of fancy. They had not been bred to the monotony of trouble which now formed their daily life. They must find some relief. Richarda found hers in fantastic words and thoughts.

After her mother had been carefully helped to bed and had fallen into the first light sleep, Esther crept back to her sister's couch.

"Dicksie," she whispered, "did the man from the chapel come to-day? What did he say?"

“He said it all over again about putting mother in the Incurables Home and me in the Hospital.”

“Oh, Dicksie.”

“Yes; and mother said she had begged them before to leave us together, and——”

“Well?”

“I suppose we ought to feel grateful to them, but it was so hard to hear her entreating that stolid man. She had to tell him all over again about our coming from California, and father’s death, and the bank failing. He seemed to have forgotten it. At last I think the dignity of her misery had some effect on him; and he said we could go on having the five shillings from them, if we could make that do with your salary. She told him——”

“What did she tell him?”

“That she knew she would not live through the summer.”

Then in the dark room there was silence a minute.

“Star,” said Richarda, “this damp, low room and anxiety about us is killing her fast—fast, Star; and if they take us away from her she will die at once.”

There was no further word spoken. The last ember of the fire fell into the ashes, and left the room in complete darkness, except for what glimmer from the Easter moon could find its way down the narrow street and through the window curtain.

Esther went back and lay down beside her mother. There are some so poor that they have no place or time for weeping.

CHAPTER V.

THE next day was Sunday, and Esther went to morning service at a Nonconformist Chapel with which her mother had formed some connection.

She prized each moment of this one day at home, yet, for her mother's sake, she went to service; and, with a great longing for solitude, which was to her unattainable, she turned on her way from chapel into the public square to sit by herself for a little while.

Birds were chirping; buds were swelling; clouds were softly passing overhead in voluminous veils of white. People thronged in the principal paths, but Esther found a lonely bench by a side railing. What she had come for she hardly knew. Her brain was scalded with unshed tears, but she had no thought of weeping. She certainly had not come with thought of gaining comfort from the sweetness of the season. She sat with her back to the concourse of people; her eyes were turned where the roofs of the town dipped with the slope of the land, and a clear cold strip of blue sky lay under the edge of the cloud.

"There is no help," whispered the girl defiantly, looking into that heavenly region of perfect blue.

The pink buds of the sycamore near her hung down and made a fretted frame to her glimpse of celestial beauty.

She had keen anxiety in her heart that she dared

not share with her mother and sister. The money she earned seemed the only means of securing to the dying mother the comfort of love in her children's companionship. So precious did the mother's last days seem to the daughter that they covered just then the whole of her life's horizon. And yesterday at the shop she had been threatened with dismissal.

"And it will come," she said to herself. "They will surely dismiss me. If I did my best for a hundred years I should not do as well as the chits of girls who have been brought up to the work."

The words seemed to rise up within her and say themselves, not audibly, but with passionate distinctness, in her mind.

Then there was a lull, and she seemed to have calm and time to consider what had been said. Again the passion arose, as of some spirit weeping within her and breaking forth into lamentations, not grandiloquent, but in the simple language of girl-life.

"Father always called me his home-bird. I am only fit for that. Oh, father, father, why did you die and leave us? Where are you now?"

Her face wore that stolid look which betokens trouble too deep for observation of its surroundings, but now she did turn her head and scan, with absent glance, the moving people. Was there, in all that town, no man, loving and strong, to whom she could turn for help—she who felt herself unable to stagger further beneath the burden she had to bear? The daughter of a truly good man will turn so naturally to manhood for help and comfort.

Her eyes fell back disconsolate to the path at her

feet. Then the moan rose within her again, "Oh, father, father!"

When it was past she sat some time and seemed to think of nothing. She watched the sparrows on the railing before her, and felt her heart numb and dead.

No one came very near her. Her mind recovered itself from its momentary torpor, and she made a little movement to rouse herself to practical thought. Think she must, for there was no one to think for her or for those she loved far more than life.

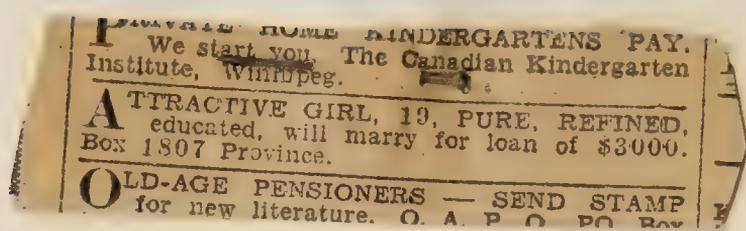
But first she looked again into the infinite distance of the blue above the plain. "There is no help," she said again. This time her lips formed the words, as if challenging an answer.

On the path, not far off, an elderly lady came slowly by in the full sail of silk robes, and after her the importunate beggar-woman. The beggar was repulsed, so she fell back, canting loud enough for others who were approaching to hear her virtuous complaint.

"Oh, well-a-day, my lady; but it's a sorrowful world, and if it wasn't for our trust in Heaven, there'd be little to keep us from sin."

Esther looked at the woman, hardly aware that she heard her. She waited until these people had gone by and her corner was quiet again. Her hand stole guiltily to her pocket and brought out a sheet of folded newspaper.

It was the advertisement sheet of yesterday's paper. Esther had read it before; she read it again, glancing heedfully over the closely printed page at a multitude of situations declared vacant in various phrase.



There was not one, or at least only one, that offered a ray of hope to her discouraged heart. She had noticed it the day before; her eyes came back and back to it with fascination.

It was not by idle chance that she had chosen the topic of last evening's talk. Under the mask of comedy she had tried to find some vent to the burden of her heart. This advertisement—the only one that seemed to offer a situation she could fill—was among some others under the head of "Matrimony;" but it was distinguished from the others by a certain particularity as to the mental qualities of the wife desired, which seemed to her to give it tone of superior feeling.

"A young man, able to meet expenses of married life, wishes to make the acquaintance of a lady, educated, courageous, and gentle, who would devote herself to making his home happy if she became his wife.—Address, 'Honour,' Office of this Paper."

"Courageous," "gentle," "to making his home happy," "Honour." Esther emphasized the words that gave her a gleam of hope. She was but young, and had lived the sheltered home life that prolongs the trustfulness of childhood.

She thought long. At length the wave of her reverie swelled and broke into resolution. She spoke half aloud as she rose. "If he has a spark of honour in him he will know that it is an honour to take care of mother; and it is not begging—I will repay it with my whole life."

Esther went home, and repeated the sermon to her mother, like a child repeating a lesson.

They had tea together. It was so cheerful to have

Star at home. They talked a little of the old home—the big, hospitable house on the other side of the world where they had dispensed such loving hospitality. They could not speak much of that past life and the dear father now dead. They each hastened to change the conversation when it glanced on any subject suggesting tears; they each knew that they dared not begin the weeping of which they could not foresee an end.

Star would write to one of their friends in the old place. She took her paper to a far corner of the room, and sat over it a long time. When she brought it back it was only half written, but it could be finished next Sunday. They all agreed that it must be a very good, long letter to be worth the stamp. They did not know that, when she ran out for a breath of evening air, she posted another letter, written secretly as she sat apart.

Poor child! she had been obliged to fling, as it were, her words on the paper; the secrecy of her act deprived her of place or time for consideration. She had written—

“I venture to answer your advertisement. Nothing would induce me to answer it if I were not in great trouble. I am twenty-four, and have good health. I have had no education that is worth anything in earning money, but I have been brought up as a lady, and have read a good many books. I believe I am gentle and courageous. I know I could make a house cosy and comfortable. I love to make people happy. I never failed in that at home.

“My mother, sister, and I came from California a year ago. My father had died. He had a large fruit farm near San Francisco, and we sold it and put all the money in the bank till mother decided where to invest

it. My mother and sister were both ill, and, as this is my mother's native place, we came here to see a doctor about my sister. When we got here we heard the bank had failed. Nearly all our friends there had lost money too, so they could not help us much, and mother's friends here are all gone. We could not go back, for mother and Richarda were too ill. Our lawyer at home thinks that by-and-by we may possibly recover a little of the money, and that would be something for Richarda; but mother is dying now, and I cannot support them. It is horrible to live on charity.

“What I want to say is this. If, when we meet, you want to marry me, and if you will take care of my mother and sister while they need it, I will be so grateful to you; I will marry you and be devoted to you all my life. They would not need much. If I could have a small house for them to live in, where they could see something better than narrow streets, I would be glad to do all the work and have no servant. I am very clever at housework. I am not pretty; but most people think I am very nice. I have not known many men, because we lived in the country; but I know my father, or any of his friends, would have thought it an honour to take care of women like my mother and sister—they are so good. None of the people we have met at the chapel here seem to think so.

“I dare say you won't want to answer this letter; but if you still want to meet me, you must write first and promise to take care of my mother and sister.”

Her true sentiments showed all the more clearly through the disordered haste of her words. Her strong young pride consorted ill with her need. She had re-

solved, and threw her poor little fishing-line out boldly into the sea of fate. She did not see how poorly it was baited. She waited the result.

She did not throw herself after her line. She knew she had no proof that the advertisement was genuine. She did not lack common sense and resource. She asked her unknown correspondent to write to initials (not her own) at the address of a small shop, whose mistress, a religious woman, neither curious nor communicative, could be trusted to keep that much of her secret.

Star had a further plan. Should the answer prove satisfactory, she determined to appoint a meeting in the old parish church between the Sunday services. The church was large and of such architectural interest that whispering parties of sight-seers were always to be seen in its dim interior, when, as on Sunday, the doors were open free of cost. As it stood on the hill, she thought she might, when she reached it, rest for a few minutes. Then, if the man whom she was to meet should accost her, and should not look honest (she had a high opinion of her own judgment), she would walk away without speaking.

“I cannot tell a lie,” she said to herself. “I can’t deny that I made the appointment; but if I refuse to speak and walk away, he can never be sure that it was I who made it.”

So reasoned Star, and she put her letter in the box.

CHAPTER VI.

STAR called on Monday evening for her answer, but there was none. On Tuesday evening she found it awaiting her.

“You are thinking of changing your situation,” remarked her friend the shopkeeper, noticing her flushed face.

After that Star was afraid to read the letter there. She took it, and walking a bit homeward in the gas-lit street, turned into a book-shop where she knew no one.

Her hands trembled so that she could hardly open the letter. The words danced before her eyes, yet they were written in clear, manly hand.

“DEAR MADAM” (it began),

“I thank you for your letter. I honour you for your sentiments, as far as I understand them. I think, however, we cannot tell whether we respect one another till we meet. If I may call upon your mother, and see you in her presence, I shall be happy to do so.

“Awaiting your instructions,

“Faithfully yours,

“HUBERT KENT.”

He gave what might easily be a genuine address.

It is natural, when we feel ourselves to be wandering

from the beaten path, that we should be aroused to try to detect the slightest sign of danger. In the two days that had elapsed since she had written, Star had been representing to herself numberless ways in which the answer might seek to impose upon her. She was ready and anxious to cast aside the communication upon perceiving the slightest hint of presumption or double-dealing, but what was there here to claim suspicion?

It is true that the letter did not contain the promise of help she had required, but the desire to be made known to her mother was praiseworthy. The letter was at once better than she had feared, and less than she had hoped. There was nothing to justify her in retiring from the offer she had voluntarily made; still less was there in it any of that spontaneous outpouring of a sympathetic heart which, in her more childish moments, she had dreamed might possibly be elicited by her own frank letter.

Perhaps the greatest deprivations of poverty are the lack of solitude and leisure. Star had a momentous resolution to take, an important letter to write: yet she dared not linger long on her way home; dared not trust to an opportunity to answer the letter at home; and she felt that, even then, her presence was an intrusion in the little book-shop, which was about to be closed for the night. What was to be done must be done quickly. She bought a sheet of paper and envelope, feeling guilty in the expenditure of her penny, and, begging grace from the stationer, she answered her letter at the counter.

"I cannot ask you to come and see my mother," she wrote, "because she would be very much displeased if she knew I had written to you. She is so delicate I

cannot tell her all that troubles me. I cannot get out of the shop except on Sunday. I am going to see the inside of the parish church about an hour before the afternoon service next Sunday. You may come and speak to me there if you choose. I am wearing black for my father."

Even then, she did not sign her name. She felt herself on the brink of a precipice of unknown depth. She tried to cling to any semblance of safety.

Never had days seemed so full of excitement, so empty of thought, as those which intervened before the next Sunday. Star did her work at the shop with a straining effort to bend her mind to it each moment and give no occasion for the threatened dismissal. At home her whole energy was turned to deceiving those she loved best, and appearing to be her old, natural self when she felt that she had left that old self far behind. All practical and useful thought was for the time suspended.

What use to think of ways and means of life when, after next Sunday, the whole course of one's life—even the very basis of living—might be changed?

There is one story of Psyche in which it is told that, to avert calamity, she walked up to a cliff whence Zephyr was to waft her to the unknown land of an unknown monster. It is likely that when Psyche was thus climbing the cliff she was almost incapable of the function of thought.

Poor Star! the Zephyr whose power she already felt upon her seemed to take away her breath. She felt all the pain of mental breathlessness. She indulged in no soft dreams of the possibility of the monster turning out a Cupid. She was prepared like Psyche, not for love,

but for sacrifice. Yet there was, after all, an element of inconsistent hope that was stronger than fear—hope for relief, if not for more positive good; hope that was born of mere youth and vigour, and fed by that glamour which, to young eyes, mercifully covers the unknown.

It never occurred to her not to keep her appointment. "I have a little headache, mother mine," she said truly, when two o'clock was past on Sunday afternoon.

"You are looking white and nervous, my child," said the mother tenderly, and sighed a deep, silent, inward sigh. Her trust was in God, but Esther's good health was her only earthly ground of comfort.

"I will go out for a little in the wind. It will blow some colour into my cheeks," said Star.

She kissed them both tenderly. She looked to see that her toilet was as neat as she could make it. She would have scorned extra adornment on this day, even if she had possessed it. When she went out and shut the door, it seemed to her that she shut off peace behind her; yet, inconsistently, she told herself that no one would be at the appointed place to meet her; that she would come back and enter there and take up the weary round of her life again without the excitement of adventure, and that the mortification of having disturbed herself for nothing would be the only trace of that feverish week.

The clock of the old church struck the quarter past the hour of Esther's appointment from above the hill while she was still walking along the street at its base. She had no wish to be early there. She would not ascend the hill by any of the graded roads. She would, as she

had planned, run up the steps at the steepest part, and so gain the pavement before the door with evident excuse to pause for rest.

It was a stormy day. Great, inky clouds, in folds and fringes of illimitable depth, were passing over the town, chased before the west wind. Only where the plain sloped there was light visible under the edge of the low cloud fringes—not the light of clear sky that had been there the preceding week, but that of a whiter, more distant sea of cloud, which had a faint, lurid glow mingled with its brightness.

Star was not seeking the sky with her eyes. She ascended the stone staircase quickly in the wind, with her back to the brighter plain. The top gained, it was no feat that she must rest some moments. She had no strength to move forward; she had no courage to look with examining eye at the few people who were about the church door. She turned her back to them all, and leaned on the railing above the stair, trying to catch breath and still the beating of her heart.

She had not been more than a minute there, although it seemed to her like many, when, in spite of her feeling of weakness and struggle, she turned round with nervous suddenness with the sense of some one near her.

The young man who had approached was of very respectable appearance. He had a dark, earnest face—a face that was evidently the index to a clearly defined character; just as hieroglyphics are evidently the characters of some intelligible language. It does not follow that we are the wiser for looking at them, and knowing that they contain a meaning. Star looked this young man full in the face, and knew no more

whether she trusted him or not than before she had turned.

He took off his hat gravely, courteously, regarding her all the time with observant eyes.

And now Star knew, as one remembers dimly the knowledge of some past time, that it was yet possible for her to walk on in proud silence, as any lady would who had been accosted through impudence or mistake. She was not conscious of deciding to recognize the man, but, with a fierce effort of courage, she restrained herself from running away from mere fear. The opportunity for ignoring her appointment was gone.

“Thank you for asking me to come here,” he said. ‘Look at those clouds. I have been admiring their procession while I was waiting. This is a fine view of the town.’”

If his words suggested finery of manner put on for the occasion, there was tact in them. Star looked off, both from him and from herself, as she was bidden, and, although she did not view the prospect with receptive eyes, she felt the impersonal object of attention an intense relief.

The town lay beneath—that is, all its newer and better part. The spires and towers of churches and chapels rose above the roofs, as gray and inky as the soft cloud masses that swung so quickly over them. Beyond, the flat fields took some light from the further, lighter clouds on the horizon. It was blank daylight, dull and cold.

The girl and the young man stood near the great Norman doorway of the church. The boles of the elms, whose mossy branches rattled above them, were encased

in flagstones of the pavement. Sparrows hopped about the ground, chirping sharply. The wind whistled about the old church roofs, and seemed to blow the starlings in and out of nooks in the steeple.

“The wind is too strong for you,” he said. “Will you come in?”

Star began to walk at his side. She had not looked at him a second time.

“May I ask,” he said again, “if you know many people in town?”

“Oh no,” she said, eager to disabuse his mind of any idea that might give her a false importance in his eyes. “We know no one at all, except that the people at the chapel that mother went to when we first came, when we lost all our money got me my situation, and now they give us five shillings a week.”

It was not at all like the composed reply she would have conned had she known that he was going to ask the question.

Psyche, landing on the enchanted ground, may have felt confused, and may have used ill-chosen language.

“I only meant to ask,” said he with hesitation, “if you would be likely to meet acquaintances, and so be compromised by being seen with a stranger. I would like you to know me better before you commit yourself to—” (he stopped a moment) “anything that looks like friendship.” His voice lowered as they entered the building.

“I have no friends, either to criticize or protect me,” she said, looking half sullenly up the nave towards the distant altar. The vista was cold enough; there was no emblem of warmth or light.

They took the conventional round of the aisles. He said—

“I am very sorry about your mother and sister—and for you” (this was added more diffidently); “for I can imagine, although I have no relatives myself, that you may suffer more in their pain than they do themselves.”

“Thank you,” she said. Her excited nerves made her unreasonably exacting. She had come full of the idea that she was going to offer to sacrifice herself to this man as payment for a definite promise of help. It made her feel like a beggar to hear the expressions of kindly pity without any hint that he wanted anything from her. She shut her lips over the “thank you” with a sort of sullen determination to say no more of her own troubles.

“You came here to consult a doctor about your sister’s health—was his opinion discouraging?”

“We never consulted him. We had only just got here when the telegram came to say that the bank our money was in had failed.”

“Ah, that was very hard.”

She did not answer. She wondered why he was saying these aimless things to her. He was perhaps merely amusing himself, and had no thought of any direct and serious aim in making friends with her. She had no time to spend in idle talk. She only wished to know from this man what he would do for her beloved ones; what he would exact from her in return. “Perhaps”—the thought came to her with sarcastic humour—“he has several girls on his list, and wants time to compare and choose.”

“Had you other answers to your advertisement?” The words were said before she was aware, and the instant they were uttered she was bitterly ashamed. He had treated her with all consideration, and the expression of her curiosity seemed so prying, so vulgar. It seemed to degrade her to the level of girls who might be supposed to answer such advertisements. She did not think definitely what class that might be, yet blushed with shame.

Perhaps he had no such keen sense of refinement, or perhaps the bitter tone of her words and the fierce blush gave him a clue to the true feeling that prompted them. He only answered quietly—

“No, no other; at least—” (with hesitation) “no other that I did not put into the fire.”

There was a little pause. They stood before a carved tablet on the wall which told the virtues of a country squire of some past generation. They had stopped before it of one accord, but neither read the epitaph.

“I want to say to you——” He broke off and began again slowly—words did not come profusely to him, “I think you must always have known good people; your father and his friends, whom you spoke of, must have been good men.” (He had evidently pondered her letter.)

“Oh, father was very, very good,” she said earnestly. “We lived a little way out of San Francisco, and every one that passed on our road used to stop at the house, and no one ever stopped without being offered something, and if they were in trouble he helped them.”

“Yes,” he said, “that was generous; but I think, from what you say, that your people are also religious. You spoke of your mother going to chapel.”

“Yes,” she assented, wondering.

“Well, I want to tell you, at the outset, that I am not good like that. I do not mean” (he hurried the explanation) “that any one who knows me could tell you anything against my character. My reputation is, I believe, blameless; but I—well, for instance, I do not go to church.”

She looked up at him. Her mind was now working with large thoughts so that she could look at him.

“I think I understand. Before we left home I should have thought it very wrong of any one not to go to church, but since we came here—oh, it is different. I hate these people who have given us charity. I go and hear the sermon to tell mother about it, but it does not seem real to me. We should be kinder to the veriest paupers at home than they are to us, although we brought letters of introduction to them.”

They walked on slowly up the aisle, talking with low voices.

“Yes,” he answered, “no doubt; but that difference may arise from circumstances. In places where there is not the same competition for a living, where money is easily made, and where all, at the outset, have known the pinch of hardships, openhandedness comes more naturally than in our overcrowded England.” His mind was evidently brimming with thought and theory, but he stopped, feeling that a theoretical explanation of facts was out of place here, as it could not alter them.

Star was hardly listening. She spoke as out of some

deep experience of her own. "It is easier, much easier, to believe in what they say about Providence when we see the best and dearest people having some comfort and some pleasure. But when all is taken from them—I can understand" (this eagerly) "what you mean about not going to church."

He saw that she had just begun to venture upon the quicksand of religious disquietude, and the first step had the intense interest of novelty to her. To him it had no novelty.

"The difficulty of the apparent injustice of circumstances has, I believe, many answers," he said. "Any one learned in religious argument can refute it. If I were you, I would try, in spite of difficulties, to hold on to the religion of your parents. I think you would be happier." The words were spoken in a tone of gentle consideration rather than admonition.

Star's eagerness died out for want of encouragement.

He pursued his intended speech.

"I am not the man your father would have wished you to"—he seemed to leave out some word and to substitute—"make friends with. I know nothing about my parents. I feel myself, as I walk about the world, to be the effect of an unknown cause."

She looked puzzled, but did not long consider his phrase. His way of putting it gave her the impression that he was clever.

"I was brought up in an orphanage, and did well at school. I began running with proofs in a newspaper office, and now I am on the staff of the evening paper here. I have paid the Orphanage all it cost them to bring me up, so I am quits with its charity. I get one

hundred and fifty pounds a year as salary, and I sometimes make extra money" (she thought the tone of his voice changed unconsciously as he hesitated here for a word) "in various odd ways. I have no relatives; I have never made any friends."

Not knowing what to reply, she grasped the last word. "Why not? Don't you like friends?"

"I mean by 'friends' people who have more hold upon you than mere acquaintances."

"Yes. Don't you like to have such friends?"

"I do not know; it is not my nature to make them." In a minute he said, "I will give you the address of the editor who employs me, and of my landlady. I have lived in the same rooms for four years. My landlady is a good woman, I believe. You can make any inquiries about me that you wish."

He stopped, and, taking out his pocket-book, wrote the address on a leaf, which he tore out and gave her.

Star did not refuse the paper. She put it carefully away, as if for future use. She had a feeling of going through some uncomfortable farce. It appeared to her so impossible ever to make the inquiry he suggested.

They moved on across the chancel and down the other side. Star began to wonder, as if she were some impartial third person, what would come of it all, and, as a more pressing consideration, whether he expected her to speak next, and, if so, what she could say.

"You say my father would not have liked me to make friends with you. I am not sure of that, because I do not know you. Father was not ambitious; he valued a kind heart. But, for that matter, would he

have liked my mother to be confined in a low, ugly room, where she never sees a bit of sky or a spring flower?—and I dare not spend a penny to buy one for her, because we live partly on charity. Oh, you don't know what it is to see them suffering, dying, for want of the comfort, pleasure, and freedom that father would have given them. How would he have borne to see them as they are now, and such a little would make such a difference!" Her voice had a shrill touch in it, as if her vocal cords were strained by suffering. It broke and trembled just before she stopped.

He seemed to wonder. "Is there no friend to whom you could apply? Is there no other employment that would suit you better and be more lucrative, that you could get?"

"If there were, would we be living on charity?" Her words and expression were proud and despairing.

"That's true; I needn't have asked."

They neared the north-west corner, where a group of ringers were about to make a great clanging among the bells of the tower.

Star stood still. "I think I had better go home," she said drearily.

"If you feel that to accept assistance from me would be as bitter to you as the assistance you are now accepting——"

"I could not, and mother would not, take anything from you unless—unless——" She stopped.

He lifted his eyebrows a little as he looked at her. She did not look at him, but stood irresolute, the picture of trouble.

"I understand," he said quietly.

“I do not know what you understand,” she said; “I only know that I cannot support them alone, and that I would do anything for any one who would take care of them.”

“I am sure you would not do anything wrong, even for such a noble object. Tell me” (there was, for the first time, a slight agitation in his voice), “do you think you could really love any one only because he was generous to them?”

“I could love that creature over there if he would make them happy.”

He followed the slight gesture she made with her eyes, and through the open doorway he saw a ragged, blear-eyed man halting on the lounging place under the elm trees.

For the first time a look of something lighter than intense gravity came over Kent's face. There was a gleam of humour in his eye, but it passed away.

“Well then,” he said. “Accept me as that wretched fellow, and I will do my utmost for you and yours.”

The bells began. The church was almost empty, so that they two could stand together without attracting notice. The verger walked past and looked at them shrewdly, but never had he seen a graver couple.

In a few minutes they sauntered out, walking mechanically in mutual silence. They crossed the stone pavement under the trees. It had begun to rain, but Star hardly heeded it. Kent had an umbrella, which he put up and held over her. He did not do it with any air of gallantry. There was nothing of that sort about him; but there was something in his manner that suggested an aptitude (which, she afterwards learned, the

best men do not always possess) for taking initiative in the protection of those under his care.

A narrow street, that went crookedly down the hill between ancient houses, was the nearest way home. Star's pace grew quicker, so that Kent had some ado to keep up with her. The rain fell heavily, and the wind drove it against them.

"I could shelter you better," said he, "if you took my arm."

So she took his arm, feeling that to refuse would be absurd. She was still unconscious of the pace at which she was hastening him along. She felt desirous of making some apology, also of thanking him—she felt thanks were his due. She began to wonder at the same moment, with feverish suspicion, if he were in earnest, and, if so, what motive prompted him. In her tumult of thought, in her surprise and bashfulness at finding her hand in his arm, she could get no words—none, at least, that she could speak with composure. At length she faltered—

"Why do you promise me this? Why should you care?"

It was a moment before he answered.

"Partly because one thing you told me in your letter was untrue."

"What?"

"You said you were not pretty."

"I am not."

"I may not be a good judge"—he spoke quietly—"but *I* think you are very pretty."

"Oh," said Star, and caught her breath. Her sensation was not of pleasure.

“When may I see your mother and sister?” he asked.

“Oh, I do not know”—with troubled gesture—“what I can tell mother. She must never, never know how I met you.”

“Will you let me tell her as much of the truth as she needs to know?”

“You?” she exclaimed. It seemed so strange to think of this stranger communicating to her mother anything about herself.

They stood at the end of the short street in which was the room that was her home. She said—

“We live there—that third house from the other end, and it is the first door to the left as you go in. But you must not come till I can think *how* you can come.”

The storm drove against her. Flustered, unable to collect her thoughts, she would have run from him; but she felt that his arm detained her under the shelter of the umbrella.

“You have not told me your name.” He looked down at her, and his glance was very kind.

“Esther Thompson,” she answered, like a child answering the catechism.

“Take my umbrella, and, when you get home, tell your mother you were caught in the storm; that a man offered you his umbrella, and said he would call for it. You can truthfully tell her that it was offered most respectfully.”

He put the umbrella in her hand, clasping her fingers over the handle, for she could not make up her mind to take it from him.

She went down the street, almost blown along by

the wind ; but as she went in at her own door she cast one look back. Hubert Kent was walking rapidly away in the driving rain, his coat collar turned up, his head bowed to protect his face from the storm. The whole street—fronts of houses and paving stones—glistened, as water glistens under the moving lights of flying clouds. Every moveable fragment on wall or pavement was hustled by the wind. Other foot-passengers—there were but few—seemed hustled by it also ; but, as she went hastily in, she received a distinct impression that the man who was bearing the beat of the storm for the sake of giving her some protection from it, was walking on in his own way, and with his own gait, unmoved either by gust or lull. His was a dark figure in the glistening rain.

CHAPTER VII.

“MOTHER, I was caught in the rain, and a man came and held his umbrella over me, and then he made me bring it home. He said he would call for it.”

Esther sat down as far as possible from her mother and sister, to guard them from the damp of her clothes. She was flushed and excited, but that was natural in escaping from the wind and from a stranger.

“And did you think it wise to take it from him, my dear ?” the mother asked reproachfully and in surprise.

“It was offered—he offered it very respectfully,” she faltered.

“Esther can’t afford to spoil her frocks now, mother,” said Richarda. “Besides, I consider the incident interesting and romantic. Was he a nice man, Star?”

Richarda was interested, but the mother looked in real alarm for the answer.

“He was—at least, I *think* he was kind,” pleaded poor Star. “He did not mean it ill, mother, I think. I can’t tell you what he was like, Richarda; I hardly know.”

That night Star could not altogether maintain the assumed light-heartedness which characterized her manner at home.

“Mother, mother!” she said, sinking down on her knees and encircling her mother’s feeble form with loving arms, “would it not be a grand thing if something should happen, and I could take you and Dicksie out to live in the country and see the flowers, and have fresh eggs and milk? Ever such a little house, with Star always at home with you, would be like paradise; wouldn’t it?”

They had talked of many things since Star came in with the borrowed umbrella; the mother had forgotten it.

“Foolish child!” she said playfully. “Why build air castles that cannot be realized?” Then, more seriously, “We have done all we can for ourselves, and we shall have everything in God’s good time, dear heart; till then, it is our privilege to be content.”

“Are you contented, mother?”

“I hope I am, and that my Star is also. She ought to be; she has health, and a mother to love her, and a very kind, patient sister.”

“Oh, mother, it is for you I am discontented.”

A wonderful light came into the mother's eyes; the light that still shines in earth's noblest souls, the reflection of radiance that shone first so long ago, when the angel host hovered over the pasture of Bethlehem.

“You have no right to be discontented for me, dear, for I have great happiness.”

At night, when sleep and darkness had fallen on the room, Star left her mother's side and went, as she had done before, to sit between the dying fire and her sister's couch. A faint, red glow fell on her face, on her nightdress, and the old shawl she had wrapped about her. Richarda awoke with a start.

Star, sitting on the floor, leaned her head on her sister's pillow. “I want to ask you,” she said, “is mother really happy—think, *happy*—here in this room, living on charity, having us live on charity, you lying here without one beautiful thing to look at, I working in a common shop and coming home at night alone? You know she would give her life to save us from what we have to bear. She can do nothing. Is she happy?”

“But she *is* happy, Star. It is mother's way. It's the ‘joy of God,’ you know.” She spoke as if alluding to an ordinary quality.

“And you, Richarda?”

“Sometimes I am wretched; but if I want anything most, it is not so much to have things different as to be what she is. When I lie here I sometimes think that is the only real peace.”

Star put her sister to sleep again as she would have soothed a little child.

She herself did not sleep, but sat there trying to realize the events of the day. Had she done wrong or right? She hardly knew. Looking inward, all things seemed uncertain. Was it only pride and wickedness in her that made her present way of life intolerable? Was it wrong to be maddened by the thought that all the beauty of the spring might pass, and her dying mother feel none of its reviving force, and her sister die too, perhaps, for lack of it? Ought she to school herself to let them bear all that other poor, not knowing that of which they were deprived, could bear more easily? Did virtue lie in letting them endure and die, and perhaps be wrenched from one another's love before the end by a cold system of charity, or was she right to rescue them from that at any cost? *At any cost?* Her face set sternly over the question—it had no answer. And what of Hubert Kent? But on this question her mind refused even to deliberate. Her faltering answer to "Was the man nice?" had been, indeed, the mirror of her own mind. She did not know. She dared not think. One detail concerning him, however, her confused thoughts grasped as the nearest practical necessity. She must pave the way for his first interview with her mother. She burdened herself with this task. She did not know how to perform it.

CHAPTER VIII.

STAR had no sooner opened the door on her return from work the next evening than she perceived that all was not as usual. There was an air of pleasure unusual to the place and its inmates. Another glance showed her flowers on the table near Richarda. That young lady was laughing. Even her mother laughed a little at Star's anticipated surprise.

"Star, Star, aren't they lovely? Keep away. They are all mine and mother's, not yours at all. *We* have a young man who comes to see us—mother and I."

They were indeed lovely, but not expensive; such things as might be gathered on an early morning walk, if one knew where to find them—primroses, violets, anemones, with cool moss and bits of ivy. Her mother was still busy taking the remainder from the basket, setting the thirsty little stalks to drink in every available receptacle, taking deep pleasure in touching the tiny messengers of spring with loving fingers. Her mother's pleasure in the flowers was so evident, so tender, that Star was stung to the quick by the pathos of the former deprivation which such pleasure betokened. During the day she had relapsed into a half remorseful feeling concerning her action of yesterday; now, she held up her head, rejoicing in what she had done, and nerved to act her part in the little scene here awaiting her.

Her sister was regarding her still with laughing eyes.

“She won’t ask where they came from, or whether they were exchanged for an umbrella or not. Oh no, she will not stoop to be curious.”

Poor Star felt more intensely curious than they could suspect, if not in the anticipated way. She knew too well that only one could have brought the flowers. She did not know how to shape her inquiries about the interview.

Yes, the visit she dreaded was past. That which had seemed the greatest difficulty in her way, her mother’s reluctance to friendly intercourse with a stranger, had been surmounted without her aid, and the manner in which it had been accomplished gave her a feeling of her own feebleness compared with another’s strength.

It appeared, when she was able to draw the full account from the laughing Richarda, that the suitor had come armed with no persuasions but what appeared to be the very simplicity of boyish straightforwardness and manly reserve. He had given an account of the Sunday interview, as far as strict truth and the omission of all that would inculcate her in her mother’s eyes would allow. Their pact of marriage of course he did not mention. He stated that he, like themselves, was friendless, but he made it clear that he had never been otherwise; he confessed that he had been a foundling, brought up on charity. He even seemed to have again reiterated that he did not come up to their standard of excellence. He said that he was quite unworthy of their friendship, yet he would esteem it an honour to be allowed to serve them as a friend. He implied that Esther was his object, yet he distinctly implied that he was not a fit suitor for her. And, withal, he had not

appeared to be plausible in manner or speech; what he said seemed to have been prompted by strong sentiments of truth, and eagerness to be of use. All that he did not say seemed withheld by natural modesty and reserve. In short, a young man less anxious to recommend himself, and more anxious to be of direct and immediate service to his lady-love, had never made an appeal to a parent's heart.

Simple and direct as his method of putting himself on a friendly footing with the family was, he had done nothing to startle the invalids; he had shown himself gentle and retiring. He had spent half an hour with these two women, both shy with the shyness that comes inevitably with suffering and confinement, and left them the happier and more light-hearted for his visit. Star blessed him in her heart.

"Of course," concluded Richarda, "our ideas concerning him are very nebulous as yet. Do you think he really means to come a-courting? We entirely agree with him that he is not good enough to be an admirer of yours; but then, you know, when a man affirms his own inferiority, you can't make any further reference to it. I am inclined to think that mother sanctioned the affair."

"I gave no sanction to anything," said her mother, growing troubled.

"You only opened your motherly heart when you heard he was friendless, and looked hospitably upon him; didn't you, dear?" asked Star.

"It is quite true that you did not *give* your sanction," continued Richarda, "but I think he has it, for all that. He stole it from you by a sort of highhanded robbery."

“There is abundance of time to consider whether we can make a friend of him or not,” the mother said.

The thought of time restored her composure, which had been ruffled by Richarda’s words. To hearts in middle life the thought of time to consider brings tranquillity, as surely as it brings impatience to youth.

The word grated on Esther. The flowers her mother was handling so lovingly would soon fade, and whence should they get more? How was she to obtain for these two ailing ones the health, comfort, and pleasure-giving influences of spring and summer, if time must be given to consider this man’s claim to rescue them? Time!—and her mother was dying!

CHAPTER IX.

HUBERT KENT came again twice that same week. The first evening Star was detained at the shop, and did not see him. He had talked to Richarda on the subject of her favourite books. He had insisted upon Mrs. Thompson’s acceptance of a basket of fresh eggs, packed in a handful of the first, sweet clover from some happy spring meadow.

“This must not be,” said the elder lady gently; “you must not bring us—” she hesitated a moment, and then said “eggs,” for want of a more general term to denote what he had brought and what he might bring.

He took back the gift instantly and put it beside his hat.

The two women looked at it and at his disappointed countenance. They both knew that the contents of the basket would give the other much-needed nourishment. Each was willing to sacrifice her own pride for the other, but Star must not be compromised.

“It is very hard on me,” said Hubert Kent. A strong distress marked his face. “What is the good of working from Monday morning to Saturday night if people whom I like are none the better for it? Am I not to have pleasures like other people because I have been set in the world without any special relation to anybody?”

“There *are* other pleasures and uses in life besides giving away eggs,” suggested Richarda playfully.

“No; I have no relations, no friends. If you will not let me do anything for you my life has neither pleasure nor use.”

Was this only a strong will that knew how to get its own way, or was there real desire to do them good in his chagrin? Perhaps both; but they only saw the distress on his face, and were touched. Richarda held out her hand for the basket.

“I will take it if mother will not, but you must remember it is I who take it, not—not Star.”

Hubert was all good humour in a moment. He put the basket near Richarda, and placed a sprig of flowering clover in her hand.

“Why do you call her Star?” he asked confidentially.

Then followed a glowing account of Esther’s perfections; all that she had been in the old home, and the thousandfold more that she had proved herself to be since they had fallen into trouble in a land of strangers

Richarda had not meant to talk about her sister or praise her, but Hubert listened with an attention which was irresistible to sisterly love and pride. Yet after this conversation there had been, or seemed to have been, an implication that he had a right to be interested in Star.

“He has stolen my consent too,” said Richarda. “He is a terrible thief.”

Still the mother reposed on that restful feeling of time, the more so that Star expressed no opinion to them concerning the new friend. Her silence seemed to them light-hearted indifference.

“She will not take it seriously,” said Richarda to her mother; “but she ought, for he is certainly in earnest. To us Americans his lack of ‘family,’ which may be said to be entire, ought not to be an insuperable objection. He is evidently able to rise. It is wonderful how well he has educated himself.”

One distinct benefit Hubert had conferred already; he formed an inexhaustible subject for thought and conversation to Richarda through the long, suffering days which she was forced to spend in that low room, from which, as Star had said, not even the sky (that part of nature most accessible to the poorest) was visible.

The invalid girl, like many who are set aside from active participation in the incidents of romance, formed definite theories concerning them, and classified each with an air of authority. “This is evidently a case of love at first sight,” she said. At another time she said, “Mr. Kent’s plan of lending an umbrella to a girl whose face he liked in a church, and then calling on her people,

is at least simpler than advertising for a wife, mother."

"Yes, better than *that*," said the gentle mother; "he would never have found our Star *that* way."

So transparent had the family intercourse been, that to suspect her child of an unavowed course of action did not enter the mother's mind.

When Kent came again on the Friday night Star was at home. The low, bare room, which heretofore had always had a certain grace in her eyes because of the privacy of love, now seemed to her more than ever an unsuitable abode for her mother. How the fact of having to receive him there bespoke their abject poverty! She could see that her mother felt it also. Habits of a lifetime of dignity and ease are not easily bent to the yoke of such necessity. Star pleaded fatigue, and sat very silent, her hands folded listlessly on her lap. Kent talked to Richarda, and again about books.

When he rose to go Star went to show him out, and, shutting their own door, stood with him at the foot of the common stair. The outer door was open to the lamp-lit street. The soft spring air came in and tantalized her; it had none of the freshness of growing green here. Above the roofs of the opposite houses a planet trembled; behind them was the unsteady light of a gas-jet, flaring half way up the stair.

Star stood with her back to her mother's door; one hand behind her still clasped the handle. She turned her face to the young man, half beseeching, half defiant.

"How are things at the shop?" he asked; "getting on better?"

“No.”

He seemed to consider. “I went to see a row of small houses out on the South Road,” he said. “They are small, and not genteel; but they are new, and seem well built and comfortable.”

He stopped again, and Star said, “Oh!” in a hopeless sort of way.

“I have decided to take one and furnish it. The houses are mere cottages; one is already taken by a working man; but better furniture would make a difference. There are fields opposite, and a meadow and a grove belonging to a big house not far off. I think you would like it; at any rate, this place is not healthy.” He spoke in a decided, slow way, as if anxious that she should follow him. “Now, look here,” he went on, and paused to dig his thumb-nail into a crack in the wooden banister (they were neither of them at ease). “Look here, if you will take them out to that house, it won’t cost you any more to live than it does here. I can have it ready in a week.”

“How could we?” asked Star. “There would be the rent and the furniture.”

“That’s my business.”

“We couldn’t,” she said hopelessly.

“You could if you would. You would be quite free; you would not be bound in any way. And then, at the end of the summer, if you still thought as you did on Sunday, then——” His voice grew softer with the last word.

“Mother wouldn’t,” she said again; “and besides, I should be absolutely bound.” Her words trembled perhaps more with excitement than feeling, although

she was touched by what seemed to her his great kindness. Recovering herself after a moment, she added, "I thank you from my heart, but we must just stay here for the present."

"That is just what you must not do," he said. "The hot weather is coming on. The drainage in this street I find is bad. To your mother and sister, accustomed to fresh air, this room is slow death. You were quite right in estimating it as that when you spoke on Sunday. I wish you would accept my plan; there is only one other."

"And if," said Star wearily, "and if, at the end of the summer, *you* did not think as you did on Sunday, how should I find money to repay you?"

He gave her a quick, respectful glance. "There is no fear of that," he said. "My mind is made up."

"Why?"

No attitude, no face, no word, could have seemed further removed from the idle dalliance of love than hers were. It was a young girl's face, growing visibly older each moment under the strain of deep emotion and anxiety.

"I follow my fate," he said. "I have this peculiarity which distinguishes me from other men—I always know my fate when I see it. You constitute all the happiness of life for me. I knew it when I first saw you; I know it now."

"That would seem to me a foolish way of talking in any one else," she said deliberately, "but you are different."

"You may believe me."

They stood and listened to the footsteps on the stone

of the street; every minute some one passed the doorway, giving no heed to them, receiving no attention.

“Then,” said Kent, as if they had had an argument and concluded it, “the only way will be to be asked in church next Sunday—that would give three weeks.”

“Is that what *you* want?”

“That is what I want—very much.”

“Then do that,” she said. The words came with a nervous gasp; she could not find voice to utter them. She opened the door behind her to enter hurriedly.

“Are you sure, Star?”

His tone was almost like a cry; he was so fearful that she would be gone before she heard him, and it came to her like some echo from outer darkness, her brain was reeling. At the narrow opening of the door she turned back a white face and looked out at him.

“Quite sure,” she said.

CHAPTER X.

STAR looked so very weary that it was not until the next evening that her mother took an opportunity to chide her gently for this colloquy.

“Did you think it quite wise, my child, to stand so long at the door with the young man?”

The tenderness of the maternal reproach arrested Star in a train of anxious thought which she was pursuing as she washed the supper dishes. That day she had met Kent to ratify her consent of the previous

evening. She was now trying to decide how she would make the communication to her mother which she knew she must make. She had no thought of telling the whole truth at once; but part of it must be told. Here was the opening. How much deceit lies in half the truth she realized sadly as she spoke.

“But, mother, I had hardly spoken to him all the evening. I did not wish him to think I was unkind.”

“That you were insensible of his kindness—I understand that; but would not a word, a moment, have been sufficient? I do not wish to find fault, dear child” (the mother’s heart was quickly sensitive to pain she might be giving), “only to let you know that you remained longer perhaps than you were aware of.”

Little did the mother know how far her daughter had gone beyond the reach of pain at such gentle admonition. Her mother’s pain was all she thought of.

“I did not mean to stay so long, but”—Star moved at her work with nervous celerity—“the fact is, he—he asked me to marry him.”

“Asked you to marry **him!**” The withered face flushed with indignation; the faded eye kindled. “So soon! This shows he is no suitable acquaintance for us.”

Star struggled to argue with apparent calmness. “Circumstances alter cases. He must perceive that it is not very comfortable to receive frequent visits from him here.”

“He confessed of his own accord that he was not a gentleman,” said Mrs. Thompson, with an unwonted touch of sarcasm in her tone. “This certainly proves it.”

“When he said that he referred to his position, not

to his character. But, mother, what position have we here?"

Mrs. Thompson sighed deeply.

Star's argument diverted her attention for the moment from Hubert Kent's personal qualities. The future of her daughters often occupied her thoughts. She could not hope much for release from poverty for them in England; her constant hope was that they might return whence they came, when she was passed away, and money enough could be gathered to defray the expense of medical treatment for the suffering Richarda, and for the return journey. But, even then, she knew too much of the fluctuating population of a western city to hope that they would be met by many steadfast friends in their native place. She knew, too, that even there the attention due to penniless girls was different to that given to the daughters of a hospitable house. It was indeed difficult to say what position they could hope to regain. But the heavenly disposition to hope and trust was strong in the mother's heart. She found no words with which to answer her daughter; none the less was she confident in that old idea, which has ruled the conduct of so many of earth's best minds, that they who love God will not be left long by Him in degradation.

Star, seeing there was no answer, followed up her advantage, but went too fast.

"Mammy"—with a sweet attempt at playfulness—"there is a little house on the edge of the town, where there is a meadow and a grove. When I marry him, you and Richarda and I are all to go there. Don't you want to go soon?"

But the mother heard nothing but that word "when," and the confident tone in which marriage was spoken of.

"Oh, my daughter!" she whispered in shocked tones; and then again, "My daughter! my Esther!" With a gesticulation unusual to a serene nature, she rose from her chair and stood with clasped hands, the strength of her heart's sorrow shining through the veil of her physical feebleness. "Esther"—with parental sternness as unusual as the demonstration of grief—"Esther, you did not pledge your word to him?"

"Oh, mother——"

"You did not, you could not, encourage the advances of a man whom you only met by chance, and who could show himself so devoid of all delicacy as to hint at marriage before a week was out."

"Mother, dearest mother, I think he is a man who makes you feel confidence in him."

"Confidence!—in a man of whom you know nothing, who could take advantage of your helpless position to speak of marriage so early?"

"Indeed, I have told my story badly; I am letting you think unfairly of him. He asked—what he really would like is, that you should take possession of this little house of his, so as to have more air, more comfort for yourself and Richarda; and then, at the end of the summer—he said distinctly 'at the end of the summer'—he thought I might know him enough to judge whether I could marry him or not. He expressly said that he would hold me under no obligation. Could I help being touched by such kindness, mother?"

"It was not kind; it was insulting."

“You forget how poor we are. An offer of help is not insulting. He was straightforward; he meant what he said.”

“But you refused it—you said at once that you could not accept it?”

“Yes; but——”

“Esther, have you promised to marry this man, of whom you know so little?”

“Yes, mother.”

“And you have done it for our sakes, my child?” The eye of love pierced instantly beneath that which appeared unfilial, but her pain was unabated. No sorrow in which a young woman might indulge could compare in piteousness with this mother’s grief.

The searching question, “You have done it for our sakes?” the turning away of the tottering form; the involuntary, audible whisper, “Never till now have I felt the bitterness of poverty;”—all these told Esther that the little arts of love and caressing, the playfulness with which she was prepared to soften her mother’s surprise and dispel her opposition, would now be quite useless. She stood frightened and irresolute. She had never before seen her mother in this abandonment of grief.

Richarda lifted herself on the couch. Her nerves were little able to bear the strain; she was becoming alarmed.

“Say that you will give it up, Star. Tell mother that you will write to him and take back what you promised.”

The advice, although it did not move Star’s resolution, had the effect of bringing some ray of comfort to her mother. She sat down now, looking white and

faint, but gazing at Esther, not so much with displeased as with entreating eyes.

“Mother, mother,” said the girl, torn with conflicting emotions; and then, startled by fear of illness, she brought such simple restoratives as they had in use, and bathed her mother’s pallid brow tenderly and chafed the bloodless hands.

Star had no thought of giving up her point. The shock to her mother upon the first hint of her marriage had been greater than she feared—greater, indeed, than she was able to understand; but, that being over, the worst was over. She would have gone through very much to have saved her mother this pain, but the worst of all would be to have inflicted the pain for nothing.

All gentle arguments that she could use, all pleading words that she dared to utter, were brought forward that night on behalf of her purpose. Her argument was not, “If I do this, you will reap the benefit.” That was her true motive, but she knew it would not serve her as a plea. She must make the most of her regard for her lover and of his kindness. Never had she felt how great his generosity was until she now perforce dwelt upon it to her mother. She truly experienced a warmer regard for him when she attempted to declare the most that she felt. She began to marvel at his goodness when she tried to make her mother marvel at it. What other man would have acted as he had done? she asked, and realized, as she asked it, that the whole facts were more to his credit than the half she had told, for he seemed to have been actuated from the first rather by a chivalrous willingness to help than by an involuntary emotion of love as her mother supposed.

The evening was not a happy one. In their old, home life of careless ease, these girls and their mother had no doubt experienced those little clouds of difference which come in all human homes. These had long been forgotten. Since the father's death and their subsequent journey and loss of fortune, the three had been bound together in perfect union of heart and mind. Now there was a false note in the harmony. Had any other grief than her own conduct troubled her mother, Star would have soothed it by a thousand pretty caresses; now, gentle and entreating as her mother was, there was a majesty in wounded motherhood, felt rather than seen, which prevented the offering of a single kiss. To-morrow, perhaps to-morrow, would see them perfectly at one again. Star said the words wearily over as, long after the accustomed hour, she tenderly put her mother to bed. She would not yield; for her mother's sake she thought she dared not; but the decision was dreary pain.

Her wide-open eyes ached as she lay in the darkness. She heard the small hours of the night strike, and hoped that her mother's gentle breathing betokened sleep.

CHAPTER XI.

STAR was roused from the beginning of sleep by the knowledge that her mother was ill. The remedies she applied with all the tense activity of alarm were of little use, and pain and faintness increased. She had lit

the fire and provided a hot cordial in vain, when Richarda, lifting her shoulders from her pillow, and looking on in nervous impatience, spoke for almost the first time.

“You must leave us and go for the doctor, Star.”

Star turned to her with a face full of trouble, as she stood bathing her mother’s hands.

“I thought you said the doctor the chapel people sent was a rich, fashionable man. He will make some excuse; he will not come to us at this time of night.”

“He was very kind when he came before. He said we might send for him any time. We must send across the square, he said, and up to the west end of the parade, then along a road of villas in gardens, and his was the fifth to the left hand.”

Richarda’s voice came across the room clear and sharp in every syllable. The room had all that comfortless look which gaslight at an unseasonable hour can give to eyes heavy with fear and broken sleep. Star looked round it as she considered. She could not meet her sister’s excited eyes. Could she leave her mother, perhaps to die in her absence, and Richarda unable to cross the room to her? Could she traverse the town alone at that most lonely hour of night? She had never been out alone after ten o’clock and, in ignorance, she exaggerated the dangers of deserted streets. And then the errand might be fruitless!

“You say he was kind?”

“Very kind,” cried Richarda. “An old man who looked as if he had seen trouble and could feel for it. Run, Star; I am sure he would come.”

To ask a neighbour from an upper room to stay with

them in her absence, to throw on her cloak and run out into the streets, was only the work of a few minutes, but to the troubled girl it seemed to take an hour. The neighbour did not come without making some sleepy and ungracious remarks. She said strength was money to her, and that if she did not get her sleep at night she was not fit for work the next day. Star hardly heard her, but when she found herself running breathless down the street she thought over the remark, and acknowledged its justice. Among the poor nothing is given without cost, thought Star. In her old life of ease and leisure how little she had ever done for any one; yet doing then would have cost her little. She thought of this in a dim, far-off way, as if it were a second self in some other sphere who was meditating on social problems. Her own immediate self was conscious of nothing but hurrying on, seeming to find the pavements difficult to pass over and the very air an impediment, her throat dry and sore with breathless haste in the night air, her eyes alert on every side for the unknown dangers that might arise anywhere in the blank, cold streets. She was conscious also of one absorbing fear—that her mother might die; one absorbing regret—that she had grieved her. As she dashed along in almost a nightmare of effort it seemed to soothe her to whisper to herself, with painful breath, "Mother, mother!"

She went down the street and across the square. A man crossed her path; he also was in haste. The tramp of a policeman was heard in another street; she heard other footsteps like echoes of her own. No one molested her; no one even seemed to take notice of her loneliness. When she was turning from the parade into the

road Richarda had described she began to feel more secure. Her safe passage so far had dispelled that part of her terrors which was imaginary; she realized that even in the depth of night the law and order of the town was protection for her.

If there is in reality a darkest hour that precedes the dawn, it seemed to be that hour. There was hardly a glimmer in the sky; no stars were to be seen.

Star looked eagerly down the avenue of lighted lamps that lined this road. The houses were well back from the street; the shrubs and trees of their gardens were black and confused in outline. She hoped to come to the fifth house with a few hasty steps; but the garden spaces were large. She seemed to walk a long way and only pass two houses.

She kept on peering into the darkness of the shrubberies to see where each house stood. She had a curious impression, as she glanced at the avenue of lamps, that its end was coming near her faster than she was walking. She saw a policeman going away from her on the other side of the road. She saw him pass under one lamp, and as he began to be visible in the light of the next, it went out, and his form was lost in darkness. A man with a ladder came running into the light of the next lamp on the nearer side. He was evidently putting out the lamps in anticipation of the dawn. He fixed his ladder to each post and ran up to reach the old-fashioned glass lantern. His movements were incredibly swift. As the lamps were on alternate sides of the street he must make his way down it by zig-zag runs. Proceeding thus, he had passed the policeman at a wide angle, but a few minutes later he emerged

from darkness, coming straight towards Star as she came under the lamp he was about to extinguish.

Star had noticed his movements enough to expect him as he came rapidly in a slant line toward the light, but when he was near she was startled, partly by his rapidity, but chiefly because it struck her that there was something familiar about his gait and figure. It certainly seemed to her, for one brief moment, that he drew in his breath and hung back at sight of her, the next she knew it must have been the merest fancy. He fixed his ladder to the post and ran up as she passed under. Before the flame went out she had time to notice that on his track came a gray dog, not large, but very powerful and fierce looking. The animal had been eating something on the opposite pavement; he came forward in a hungry way and was looking at the lamp-lighter as if expecting more food. Hardly realizing what she saw, Star turned into the gate of the house she sought. The strain of her anxiety was so great upon her mind that all she remembered of the incident the next moment was a wonder, already growing faint, that she could not recollect who it was that she had ever known who resembled this lamplighter.

“Mother, mother,” whispered poor Star to herself. Her breath came now in painful gasps, for she had quickened her pace for a final effort. She passed between black shrubs to the dark house and rang the bell once, twice, not waiting long.

A tall, dignified-looking man opened the door. He had no light. Star could only speak in short, breathless clauses, but she made him understand her errand, and gathered from him, in return, that he was himself the

doctor, that he would come with her at once. He took his cloak and hat from a rack behind the door, and was with her in a moment.

A feeling of gratitude began to swell in her heart towards him for his promptness. It was great relief to feel that she was going back, that she was bringing help. At first he did not speak to her, observing that she was out of breath. Confined to his steady gait, she found that she seemed to pass over the ground as quickly, and with much less effort than in her former excited running. Composure and power of quiet breathing gradually returned to her.

In this way they walked side by side till they came to be passing the first villa, whose pleasure-ground formed the corner of the road and the parade.

“Ha!” cried the doctor, pausing. “What’s that?”

Star also stopped short with startled ears.

A great crash, as of breaking glass, suddenly resounded through the stillness of the night. There was a moment’s intense quiet, and then a fierce barking and howling as of dogs setting upon some intruder or fighting among themselves.

“Well,” cried the doctor again. “Well, we have no time to be stopping.”

They walked on again at steady speed.

“It sounded to me,” said Star (because it was a relief to her to speak), “as if some one had broken a large window.”

“Yes, it did; it sounded uncommonly like that,” said the doctor, but he spoke in a preoccupied tone.

She soon found, to her increasing gratitude, that the subject claiming his mind was her mother’s illness. He

asked her some questions about the attack, which showed a recollection of the case.

“What brought on this seizure?” They were crossing the square together.

“Distressing intelligence.” Star gave this information after a moment’s thought. In her effort to keep up with his long strides she never looked at him.

“Can the cause of distress be removed?”

“I—I hardly know—lessened, perhaps.”

“In your mother’s case everything depends upon keeping the mind easy,” he said. “Medicine can do little except to alleviate the more painful symptoms. In a general way I would say that, as far as possible, it would be well to conceal anything of an unhappy nature from her.”

“I know that. I have done my best.” Star spoke almost angrily; her heart was swelling with pain.

“I am sure you have,” he muttered politely. He seemed again preoccupied; perhaps his mind had wandered to some other patient.

But to Star the reproach he had appeared to convey was intolerable, and the more so because this man was one of those in charge of the charity doled out to them.

“Oh,” she burst out, “it is living in that low, sunless room that is killing them both. Would it not be the best thing to get them both into an airy, cheerful house, and give them more comfort? Could anything be worse than staying where they are?”

The doctor seemed a little at a loss. “You are right in saying that her present situation is not the best for your mother’s health.”

It occurred to Star that his hesitation arose from supposing her to be begging for more aid. She tried proudly to say something to contradict that impression.

“If,” she began, “by vexing my mother, I could get her into a nicer place?”

“Can you explain more clearly?”

“An old man, who seemed to have seen trouble himself.” Star remembered Richarda’s words. Her nature recoiled from telling her dilemma, but her mother’s life seemed to hang in the balance. This doctor must be able to advise. In her great fear and pressing perplexity she resolved on confidence.

But how begin such a confidence? Ordinary thought is indefinite. Star looked within, to be confronted with a host of surging emotions and a knowledge of facts, about which she felt incapable of beginning any intelligible account. They turned into the last street, and she knew there were but a few minutes in which to speak.

“I want to get married,” she began. The words were untrue, the exact opposite of truth—had they been true she could not, perhaps, have said them—but they seemed to her to convey tersely the point at issue. “And the man——” She stopped. “The young man——” His name would carry no information to her listener; she was not familiar enough with it herself to use it from habit, but when she stopped to find herself faltering about “the man, the young man,” she could get no further. “Why not say ‘my young man’ at once?” she thought to herself, with that acrid humour that often attends shame.

“I understand”—the doctor spoke in judicial tone, inclining his head slightly towards her—“your lover.”

“He would be very generous to them. He would take them to a house on the South Road, and I could be with them all day instead of going to the shop.”

“Good!” said the doctor heartily. “Nothing could be better than that.”

“But I only met him lately, and we do not know much about him, and mother doesn’t like me to marry because I have only known him a week.”

In spite of their haste and the comparative darkness, the doctor turned his head and looked at Star narrowly.

Her words rushed on now like a stream through broken barriers.

“But how can I wait? That room is killing them, and I can’t get on at my work thinking of them. They threaten to dismiss me at the shop. You said yourself it would be the best thing for mother to get into a better room.”

“Your motive is simply to secure their comfort?”

His tone seemed so much to expect an affirmative answer, that she gave it without thought.

“Oh, entirely; and if I wait, the heat of summer will come, and this street——”

“Yes. Is the—ah—the young man well-to-do?”

“He has one hundred and fifty pounds a year, and he makes more in odd ways. We live here on a pound a week.”

“I see, I see. Then if, by making inquiries, it would be possible to set your mother’s mind at rest as to the

excellence and constancy of his character—ah, could anything be done in that way? Nothing is more desirable, certainly, for your mother than such a change of residence as you describe. If I could do anything by making inquiries——”

He spoke in a cheerful, quick, professional way, as if, Star thought, he had been accustomed to be on some charitable board and dispose of each case as it came up in humane, but very business-like style. Yet she was grateful. If her mother lived, this offer was perhaps the best thing that could come to them.

“Yes,” she said, assenting to his thought rather than to the form of his words.

Then they passed hastily into the sick-room.

Star saw that her mother still lived. In blind thankfulness of relief she stood holding to the foot of the bed, unconscious for a moment of all else. The doctor stepped with silent strides to the bedside, and taking the sick lady’s cold hand, looked down at her with calm but eager scrutiny. His action was very gentle, his mien full of respectful solicitude. Star collected herself again, to see him in this attitude, and to see that he was a young man—with a dignified bearing certainly, but still, a young and very handsome man. She saw this; she experienced the shock of a great surprise, while she was conscious of seeing and thinking of nothing but her mother.

“She will get better, I think,” said the doctor cheerfully. He was looking into the sufferer’s face, trying to bring the meaning of these reassuring words to her dimmed intelligence. Under his skilful handling and strong encouraging presence her mind seemed to come

slowly back from some other world whither it had gone, and to shine again in her eyes.

The young doctor had worked over her mother for half an hour, Star had been out to the chemist's and back again, the neighbour had been sent back to bed, and Richarda had been soothed; all this had happened before Star reverted mentally to the conversation that had passed, and to her first astonishment at perceiving that her companion was not many years her senior.

He was still holding the reviving pulse of the invalid between his shapely fingers.

"You will do nicely now." He smiled to the invalid, who smiled in return. Star knew that the half-caressing cheerfulness of his tone was probably a professional mannerism. She felt that it was pleasant.

"You," she began, "you are not Dr. Bramwell?"

"Yes, I am," he said; "at least, my name is Charles Bramwell. But I am not my father, if you mean that; I am my father's assistant."

"Oh," said Star faintly, "it was the elder Dr. Bramwell who was here before."

"Yes; but he told me about the case. He was interested. We often have cases in common—my father and I." He still spoke with unvarying cheerfulness. He rose and took his hat and gloves, which were lying on the bare floor, where he had put them on entering. "My father is excessively busy just now. I will come back in the morning about eleven."

"Thank you," faltered Star.

He was gone. Star took his place at the bedside. Soon her mother slept. The gray morning crept in at the window. Star had many thoughts.

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN the doctor came the next morning, Mrs. Thompson had the transient strength of slight fever upon her. She was distressed and restless—the feeble, undemonstrative restlessness of one accustomed to suffer. Star did not know whether what had transpired yesterday was preying upon her mind or not. She rather thought that the physical weakness might prevent anxious thoughts, but there was such subdued pathos in the sufferer's expression that she did not wonder the doctor should think of the trouble of which he had heard, and suppose that it was uppermost in the patient's mind. Perhaps, too, with a physician's instinct, he was anxious to rouse again that interest in earth which might so easily flag in the weary spirit that seemed so meet for heaven. Star was sitting some way from the bed, preparing something for her mother's use. She heard him, as he sat with his finger on the pulse, lean forward and speak to her mother in tones of kind confidence. She was not meant to hear; perhaps other words she would not have heard, but now each syllable seemed to force itself upon her perception, so that she could not choose but follow with painful attention.

“Your daughter was kind enough to tell me last night the circumstances which, by distressing you, brought on this attack. I want to say that you must not think you are quite friendless in this country. My father feels, as I do, that we have a duty in helping you.

I understand your apprehension in not having known the young man longer; but inquiry can be made—strict inquiry. If you will authorize me to do this for you, I will do it.”

Star could easily believe here that he was answered by some look of gratitude, but also of hesitation. He went on in the same low tone.

“If it should turn out that the young man’s disposition is as worthy as—his taste is evidently superior, this change could not fail to be beneficial to you all; and if it can be found that in any way he falls short of an honourable standard, I am sure that Miss Thompson only needs to know the truth to acquiesce in your opinion.”

“I am surprised that she told you,” was the feeble answer from the bed.

Star rose and came to the foot of the bed. Before, when she had tried to praise Hubert Kent to her mother, she had felt a new warmth of regard for him. Now, when another man, and a young man, was proposing to test his reputation, she experienced a feeling of loyalty to her betrothed which was wholly new. She drew herself up, with a consciousness of womanly dignity, because she felt her own dignity allied to his.

“Mother, Dr. Charles Bramwell’s offer to make these inquiries on your behalf is exceedingly kind. We have no friends here, and you are ill. I think you ought to accept it. It was Mr. Kent’s own wish—his first wish—that you should inquire about him, and he gave the addresses of people who know him. I have no wish to ask any questions—I am satisfied; but if you will do it, you will be happier.” All the time she looked only at her mother.

“I think you will feel more satisfied, Mrs. Thompson,” said the young doctor in his cheerful tone of strong decision. He had been looking at Star while she spoke, and, if the degree of his interest was greater than it would have been becoming to show, he was too well bred to betray it.

Star got the paper Hubert Kent had given her. She came and gave it to her mother, still speaking only to her.

“If you give it to Dr. Bramwell, and he is kind enough to use it, I shall be glad, for there is no one else to do it for you. At the same time, I should like to say” (her words, though gentle, took on additional distinctness) “that I only told him about our trouble because, in the dark, I supposed him to be the elder Dr. Bramwell.”

Star went back to her work again.

“Oh, I did not know I could be taken for my father. I am not like him.” The voice betrayed, perhaps, greater surprise than he cared to show.

“I never saw Dr. Bramwell,” said Star, without lifting her eyes. “Richarda told me that he was elderly.”

“I am very sorry that I am not elderly for the occasion.” He said it with pleasantry, in the tone of a professional man who feels it a point of etiquette to pass over an awkward place with ease. “But I do assure you, Mrs. Thompson, I will try to serve you with what prudence and discretion I possess.”

He took the little folded paper from his patient’s hand, and shook hands with her and with Richarda in a cheerful, decided way. It was noticeable that he felt so sure himself that inquiry must be made concerning

Hubert Kent, that he had not waited for any actual commission.

While he was giving final directions to Star, they went to the outer door. No sooner was the room door closed upon them than he turned upon her with—

“Did you see a dog last night?”

Star felt dazed. “I beg your pardon—a dog?”

“Yes. Did you notice one in our road last night; or a man, or anything that attracted your attention?”

He seemed so fully occupied with a sharply defined idea of what he wanted to know that the abrupt form of this question did not strike him.

“I saw several people on my way from here to your house. I hardly remember— Yes, I saw a dog. It was on your road.”

Her recollections of the successive impressions made upon her during the anguish of her night walk were like the spirits called up by magicians which gather themselves slowly into form from formless mist.

“Ha! What was it like? Was it with a man?”

“No, it was not with a man. It was near a man, but, I think, not with him.”

“Perhaps he had a chain or a cord that you did not see. The dog might lag some way behind and yet be led.”

“Oh no, there was no chain. The man I saw could not have been holding the dog, for he had a ladder and was putting out the lamps. The dog came from the other side of the street.”

“Putting out lamps!”—in disappointment.

“Yes; he went up each lamp on a ladder in the old-fashioned way.”

“What was the dog like?”

“Hairy, I think; about the size of a bull-dog—not a bull-dog.”

“Exactly!”—with excited interest. “And you say it was alone—no one leading it?”

“It came across the street alone.”

“Most extraordinary!” These words were uttered with energy, as he looked thoughtfully out at the doorway and smoothed his yellow beard. “And there was no one near but the lamplighter? Why was he putting out the lamps so early?”

As Star could not be supposed to answer this question, she said nothing.

“Ah well; thank you. Good morning.”

But Star’s curiosity resented his departure at that moment.

“Will you not tell me why you ask?”

“I beg your pardon! I ought to have explained.” His preoccupied air vanished, and he turned towards her with the natural pleasure of telling an interesting story to an interested listener.

“You remember that crash of breaking glass we heard as we passed the corner house?”

“Yes.”

“And the dogs fighting?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it seems that the crash was the breaking of a window in the basement of Mr. Allan’s house. When the servant heard it he went to the room with their own house-dog. He found this other dog eating a large piece of meat. The two dogs began a desperate fight. Mr. Allan came down, his two sons, and another servant;

but this strange dog was so fierce that it was some minutes before they could get their own dog away, and then they had to shoot the other. It belonged to the mews at the end of the road and must have got loose from its chain. But the queer part of it is this. The dog couldn't have broken the plate-glass window in the way it was broken, and some one must have given him the meat which he brought in with him. It looks as if somebody had broken the window and then put him in from wanton mischief."

"What could have been the object?" said Star.

"Devilry, I suppose—pure devilry."

"The dog I saw looked very fierce; he might have been mad."

"He is dead now, any way;" and, with this conclusion, the young doctor went away.

All that morning, as she nursed her mother, Star seemed to hear the clergyman's voice in the old parish church upon the hill; the solemn words of the banns of matrimony had her name in them, and that other. She seemed to hear them mutter again round echoing chancel and nave, although she was half a mile away. And this was again the peaceful Sunday! Last Sunday morning she had never seen Hubert Kent, and last evening she had met him for the third time, to give formal sanction to that reading which would couple their names for ever. That yesterday evening seemed now a month away—the night, the morning, had held so much.

Hubert came to call that afternoon. Star was obliged to meet him at the door, explain her mother's illness and its cause, and dismiss him as quickly as possible. She spoke and acted hastily and awkwardly.

He gave her flowers for her mother, spoke some appropriate words of sympathy, and left immediately at her request.

As soon as he was gone she thought that she ought to have told him of the inquiry about to be made. After his generosity and considerate conduct, was it fair to leave him to find out for himself that some one had been sent to pry into his private affairs—a man, too, younger than himself, and one who, though respectful to them as women, might easily, Star thought, act brusquely towards another man of inferior social position?

At this other considerations arose. Would Dr. Bramwell, in pursuing his inquiry, discover the truth about the advertisement? Would he hear that the names had already been read in church? Star, in her ignorance of Kent's circumstances or of Bramwell's mode of procedure, could not answer these questions; but it was absolutely essential that whatever information Bramwell might gain on these points should not be conveyed to her mother. The first fact her mother must never know; the second she ought not to hear until she should have become familiarized with the idea of the marriage. Must Star, then, intercept the doctor when he came to tell the result of his efforts, and let him know that he must not mention these matters? No, she would not do that. Trouble might drive her to much, but not to that. Her heart refused the task.

It was a curious thing that her mortification at having unwittingly confided her brief love-story to this young doctor became a force stronger than any other to drive her nearer to the man she had resolved to

marry. Her distress at having spoken too frankly to the one man made her feel the need of the other's protection; the interference of the one drove her into new sympathy with the other. She was not aware of reasons; she felt the force, and obeyed it blindly.

She fell into thought concerning Bramwell. How young he was! how very handsome! Why did these qualities make his service in the matter appear the more impertinent as regarded Hubert Kent? The two men stood so wholly apart, belonging to such different spheres of life, that it seemed unreasonable that comparison of their age and appearance should come into the question. So Star's reason decided, and in another moment something other than her reason was musing upon the doctor's qualities again, as if they were vital to the question. He was such a—such a *gentleman*. Yes, that was the word that described, but did not define, the noticeable characteristic of the son of the rich doctor in comparison with Hubert Kent. It was not that Star did not think Kent a gentleman—her western definition of that word was vague—but about the other there was a clinging atmosphere of a world in which manner was always consciously right, the elegancies of life always at command; in which energy in a profession and benevolence toward others were entirely spontaneous, not compelled by personal necessity and close contact with the need of others. And this gentleman, in speaking to her mother concerning Kent, had said, "If it should turn out that the young man's disposition is as worthy as his taste is evidently superior." She remembered the low, confidential tone, the emphasis of slight pause which he laid on the last phrase. Her face flushed with an an-

noyance she could not analyze. Passing the little looking-glass, she glanced in it curiously. Did Dr. Bramwell also think her pretty?

All the remainder of that day Star was restless and miserable. It still remained to make sure that Bramwell would not betray her secret to her mother. The uncertainty of what he might learn and what he might say was dreadful to her. If she would not beg secrecy from him, how secure his silence? She felt she had walked into some horrid trap. And how could she atone to Hubert Kent for not having her wits about her when he called, to warn him of the proposed inquiry? At last, and it was actually at last, after every other course had been considered and rejected, it occurred to her to find Kent and explain the whole difficulty to him. Although she had always been so uncomfortable in his presence, her worry of spirits was now such that the thought of seeing him again was a relief.

She would try to see him before he went to work the next day.

CHAPTER XIII.

OH, the freshness of a sunny April morning, when the day and the summer seem coming to us, a new creation, untarnished from the imagination of God!

Even in the narrow streets the mornings of spring have sweetness, and in the suburban roads the town-accustomed eye can find no flaw in them.

The trees are busy preparing to cast a shadow once more, each like a sinner of ancient fable, who, having lost his shadow by contact with evil, regained it by virtuous toil. The birds and the boys are whistling concerning their own pleasures, and the sky is blue, beyond the dream of earthly blueness, between its floating clouds.

On such a morning Star walked up the hill to the old church, and out to the southern suburb of the town beyond. She believed that a man of Kent's energy would go to his day's work early. She had started at seven o'clock, and, after the weary night of broken rest and watchfulness in the close room, her morning walk seemed like passing out of Hades into the Elysian fields. Flowers from more southerly places were at the doors of many of the shops; flower-sellers passed her with big bunches of hyacinth and daffodil. The elm trees on the pavement before the old church held up their shining buds against the sunlit heaven. When she got further on there were garden patches. The houses stood further back from the street, and the expanse of sky open to view was wide and satisfying. Star did not altogether like her errand; although she felt that to speak to Hubert would be a relief, she did not like the appearance of visiting him. Had the morning been gloomy she would have felt increasing objections; as it was, she tripped along, buoyant with the mere joy of living. The lambs leap in the springtime; and a young woman, however tragic her situation, if she be healthy, will feel happy in spite of herself at seven o'clock on a sunny April morning.

Star was not familiar with this part of the town.

When she came to the name of the road Kent had given her, she glanced up and down it with some curiosity. In what sort of a place would she find the man who was so soon to be her husband? Never was a street more commonplace and, at the same time, more pleasant. There were long rows of comfortable, unpretending brick dwellings, with that space of garden in front of them which denoted that Dame Fashion did not pass that way to put up the price of ground by sweeping it with her silken skirts. The houses were not smart; the gardens themselves, when in order, had an appearance of being home-made, and when not in order looked well trodden by children's feet. The little maids that scrubbed the doorsteps were not models of prim servants, yet they, too, looked happy in the sunshine. The whole street seemed to bustle into a smile. Families at breakfast sat with open windows; shop girls and school-children began to set out for the day; milkmen whistled, and joked with the shabby servant girls, and had exactly as good a reason for doing so as the pansies in the tended gardens had for smiling all across their faces at the sunshine.

Star looked for her number with a lightness of heart that astonished herself. The house, when found, had little to distinguish it from the others—a lilac bush at the gate, very early in leaf; a little flagstone path between grass plots; a bed of ragged wallflower close by the door. Star gathered these impressions as she walked up to the door. It was wide open, and the sun flooded the entrance. Star stood and looked at the worn wax cloth upon the floor of the narrow lobby and the worn carpet on the stair. Very respectable, very

commonplace, looked the interior, as far as she could inspect it. She felt in no hurry; for now, if Hubert Kent were in the house, there was no fear of missing him. In a minute she put out her hand rather reluctantly and raised the knocker.

"Yes—oh, I'm coming—yes." Various murmurs of tranquil tone seemed to respond to the light knock, and proceed from the room near the door. There was a rustling of skirts also, and at length a goodly personage, a woman somewhat past middle life and wonderfully stout, stood in the lobby and smiled at Star.

"Mrs. Couples?" Star spoke in interrogation, for "Couples" was the name of the landlady who she had heard, was a "good woman."

The smile broadened, if that were possible. "Yes, dear—yes; I am Mrs. Couples."

The voice had an inward sound and was just slightly spasmodic, as if its owner was always a little out of breath with the effort of the last movement. The impression she gave as she stood was that she could not move again.

"Mr. Kent, I think, lives with you?"

"Yes, dear; yes, he does that." The epithet applied to her did not give Star to understand that she appeared to be acting a childish or timid part, but that Mrs. Couples would have said "dear" to the Queen, had her Majesty stood at the door. It was thus impossible to resent it. "Yes; he's taking his breakfast, upstairs in the front room, at this present time."

The speech cooed on continuously, as if it was satisfaction to her to prove that she was not too fat to talk.

“I should like to see him,” said Star, perceiving that this further information was necessary.

“Just go right up, dear—right past me and up the stair. He’s taking his breakfast in the front——”

“I would rather see him here, if you would be kind enough to tell him that I would like to speak to him.”

An expression of extraordinary good-will came over Mrs. Couples’s fat countenance.

“Yes, dear” (as if with surprised delight at her own prowess), “I will go up and fetch him down.”

She then turned, or rather began to turn, for the revolution itself seemed to take some time, while the journey to the stair and up it took so long, that many and various murmurs had time to float back to Star as she watched the wide skirts and big, comfortably shod feet mount the steps by slow degrees. The murmurs became more breathless towards the top, and when she ceased to see and hear Mrs. Couples, Star’s own breath came quickly, and her heart beat with nervous expectation.

There was a quick movement in the room above, a strong, light step on the upper landing and at the head of the stair. From the sound of the step Star felt sure that Kent had come down the first part of the stair rather with curiosity to know who was there, than with any intention of hurrying. She could not look up; she dreaded the moment that he should recognize her.

Had she looked up, she would have seen Hubert Kent dressed in a well-fitting but eminently useful suit of gray tweed. There was something analogous in this tweed to the man. His slight but firmly knit figure,

his dark face framed in short, black hair, suggested a thing made for use, but useful because of a certain fineness of fibre and texture. In the dark-gray eyes, too; in the regular but strong features, there would seem to be that same inscrutable mixture of good and evil of character as there was of white and black which made the grayness of the tweed—for who, looking at such a fabric with unskilled eye, can tell in what proportion the colours are woven?

Star had read the footsteps aright. Kent walked to the head of the stair and three steps down with only the intention of seeing who was there. Then, had she looked up, she would have seen a new light come suddenly across his face, as if some reflecting facet in the sunshine had flashed light up the narrow stair. Then, had she been able to look nearer, she would have seen in the dark eye a tiny picture—tiny, but so perfect—of a maiden whose cheeks blushed rosily, and whose hair was touched by the sunshine to golden brown; and outside the door which framed her form the bed of wallflower took up again the gold and brown and the blush of the cheek, and seemed to play with the hues, intensifying them and throwing them about from petal to petal and flower to flower; beyond, the spiky form of the lilac bush seemed to burn with lambent green as it cast a broken shadow on the path. All this was in the picture; all this, if she could have known it, lay on the retina of the young man's memory long, long after it had passed from that of his eye.

Star did not look up. She had no notion of the picture. All that she knew was that she felt ashamed of being there until she could explain the necessity of

her errand, and beyond that, if she had a thought, it was that her gown and hat were shabby. So little we know!

She did, however, attend to the language of the footsteps, and knew that the instant their owner came low enough to see her, they broke into a light run and Hubert Kent was at her side.

He asked after her mother with some anxiety; he seemed truly glad that she was better.

Mrs. Couples toiled down the stair after him, and, planting herself in the narrow lobby, regarded Star with a look of kindly triumph, as one who has scaled an alp to oblige a friend.

"Yes, dear," she murmured, smiling, "I went up and fetched him down."

Hubert took his hat and walked out with Star.

Very tersely and hastily she told him that the doctor who was attending her mother had inquired the cause of her mental distress, and had offered to make inquiry about him.

"I am very glad of that," said he quietly.

"I thought it was only fair to let you know."

"Thank you."

"I thought, perhaps, you would not like it, because—well, because he is only a young man, you know. I thought— You see, I spoke to him at night, and it was dark, and I thought it was his father who had come before."

Whatever Kent might have thought of this not very lucid explanation, he only said—

"As long as your mother trusts him, that is all that is necessary. If it makes her feel more comfortable about it, that will make you happier; won't it?"

“Yes,” said Star. She had evidently something more to say. “Will he—will he hear about the—about the advertisement?”

“Certainly not. There are only two people now who know anything about it, and, unless you tell of it, no one else will ever know.”

“I did not know whether it was possible to manage those things with perfect secrecy.”

“If one knows how to do it, it is.”

“Will he hear about the—about the church yesterday?” Star dropped her voice, she never looked at him.

“That I cannot tell. It is probable that some one who knows me, if not you, will have been to the church. It will get about among those who know me soon, certainly. If he is asking questions, I should think he is likely to hear about it.”

“You see, mother must not know it for a week or ten days yet. She does not know much about how things are done in this country. She will not need to know how soon it was begun.”

“Yes, I understand; it would startle her, in her weak condition, to hear you had taken this step without her knowledge.”

“Exactly. He *must not* tell her.”

“When he comes, then, could you not see him first and tell him that is not to be mentioned.”

“I would rather not. You see—well, I don’t like to ask him not to tell mother things about myself; it does not seem nice.”

Kent looked at her, but she did not notice it.

“I think, then” (quietly), “the better way would be for me to call upon him, if you will give me his address.”

I will go this evening. I can help him about his inquiry perhaps better than any one else. I will see that he does not bungle matters. Will that do?"

Star gave a sigh of relief. That would do excellently well. She expressed her satisfaction, and gave the address in the same breath.

They took a few more steps on the sunny pavement in silence. Kent had led down a side street; it was one way back to town.

"I told them, you know," said Star, "that you particularly wished that inquiry should be made. I said I did not wish it, but that you did."

"Why did not *you* wish it?"

He looked at her again, knowing that she was not aware of his glance. Each time he looked he seemed to like to look longer. His eyes rested on her with great satisfaction, but not without solicitude.

"Shall I tell you why?" he went on, as Star, walking hastily and looking embarrassed, gave no answer. "Because this whole affair is so disagreeable to you that if I should turn out more or less of a blackguard, you could not have greater aversion to marrying me than you have now."

"Oh no, not that—not at all," Star said, and seemed to belie her words by an evident desire to escape from him that instant. She said "good-bye," and that she must hurry home now, and would he please go back to his breakfast? He did not press her, but let her go.

In a few minutes, however, she heard his quick step coming after her. On second thoughts he had something more to say. He did not run, but caught her up by quick, steady walking.

“Excuse me, Miss Thompson” (he said the name a little shyly). “I have been thinking that your mother’s illness will cause expense. She ought to have everything she could use.” He took out his pocket-book as he spoke.

“Oh, I can’t,” said Star, drawing back.

“Yes, you can if you will. Consider, it is for her sake; and, between us, what does it matter whether it is now or three weeks hence?”

He had opened the pocket-book and taken out a five-pound note. It was not a full purse by any means; this was the only note in it.

“I can’t,” said Star. “But you are too kind.”

“That is nonsense,” he said almost sharply. “It is only you who are kind. I am asking a favour.”

“I don’t think you can afford it,” she said simply.

“You must not think that I would do what I cannot afford. Every man with any sense who expects to marry, puts by something to spend as he likes then. It is for your mother’s sake,” he urged again. “She must have medicine and the best food, and you cannot go to work this week and leave her. If you do not take this from me you must accept help from some one.”

Star thought of Bramwell, and supposed Hubert did also. In her perplexity she raised her eyes full to his for the first time.

“Ought I to take it?”

His urgency became suddenly timid. He seemed not only touched by the appeal, but surprised at his own emotion.

“You know far better what you ought to do than I can tell you,” he said. It seemed to take him some

little time to regain the balance of his feelings. "Will it help you to think whether your scruple comes from a sense of duty, or from a conventional rule which does not apply to us?"

He had always the newspaper's flow of phrases at command; in this case his words seemed to Star to show discrimination. In a moment she put out her hand for the note, which he had been nervously folding up into the smallest possible fold.

"Thank you," was said in heartfelt tones, as the fingers of her worn gloves had closed upon it, but it was he, not she, who said it, and before she could speak he was gone.

Star tripped homeward with the note folded tightly in her palm. Her heart felt astonishingly light. She could not scold herself into any proper misery at what she termed her degradation. He was very kind—"awfully kind," so she phrased it to herself. He had left his breakfast; he had entered into her trouble and helped her; he had given her five pounds. Never mind! She would make it up to him by being a thrifty wife, and she would always help him in his troubles, and would make him such nice breakfasts. Then she fell to wondering how he liked his coffee, and whether he would like American cake for breakfast. Star had but one idea of marriage—a long vista of cosy meals and cosier evenings, for which the wife provided all the pleasure. "I can cook very well," thought Star, "and I know I can make myself very delightful."

It was, no doubt, the present sunshine that helped to gild the future, but it was very pleasant to change the note for gold and silver, and rashly spend a shilling on a

pot of pansies, as well as get other necessaries, to take home with her. It was also pleasant to be going home instead of to the shop.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN Star opened their own door, there was a baby crying inside—crying, nay, roaring. It was wrapped up in an old, gray shawl, and lay by her mother on the bed. There was no other stranger there. Richarda, raised on one elbow, looked excited. Her mother was feebly patting the baby with one hand.

“That beggar woman has been here,” said Richarda, “exceedingly drunk. She was evidently going off on the spree for another day, and mother made her leave the baby—it would have been killed else. She could not walk straight.”

“I’d rather have somebody else’s baby killed than my mother made ill again,” said Star, speaking the natural prompting of her heart; but this sentiment so distressed and shocked her mother that she was obliged to retract it.

She took the screaming bundle from the bed, and looked round the room hopelessly for a place to put it.

“I know it’s adding to your burdens, daughter,” the mother apologized faintly, “but I could not let her go out with it. She was reeling in this room, and going to reel into the next public-house.”

Star held the baby at arm’s length with a discom-

forted face ; but even in that position the feeling of the little thing's helplessness won upon her. She moved it up and down as if testing its weight. "It is fat. It might just as well be a little squealing piggie," she said ; but, even as she spoke, she drew it involuntarily nearer her bosom.

"Oh, my love, *don't* speak so ; it is wrong." The sick lady moved restlessly on her bed as she spoke.

"Well, well, mother" (good-naturedly), "anything for peace. Let us call it a squealing immortal soul."

"It can't be the soul that squeals, for feeding usually stops it," suggested Richarda.

"How I wish we had something to give it!" said Mrs. Thompson piteously. "We never feel the want of milk so much as when that little hungry mouth comes to the door."

Then Star remembered her purchases on the way home.

"Somebody has provided milk, mother."

"Who?"

"Somebody," said Star significantly, "who would be very kind, even to the beggar baby, if he were here."

There fell a silence in the room. It was the first time Star's strange lover had been familiarly spoken of in connection with their own affairs. The mother shrank back within herself. But Star's spirits were high ; she could hope that to bring the baby and the milk together would be a powerful, if not logical, argument.

"See how he takes it, mother ! Poor little thing, it was hungry, then."

The milk had been warmed, and the baby, unrolled

from its shawl, lay on Star's lap. It gave a short cry yet between every spoonful, but these cries were becoming gradually more subdued. Star was seated in full view of her mother's bed that her argument might have full force.

"It is very rich milk," she remarked; "the baby likes it."

There was no answer.

It was thus that the young Bramwell found them. Coming three steps into the room, he stopped short in surprise.

"How! a baby?"

"A very fine baby," said Star, struck partly by the humour of the situation, but aiming to make light of her burden for her mother's sake.

"Remarkably fine," he said, eyeing it with professional criticism.

Then followed the little history of their acquaintance with the child—all that the mother and Richarda could tell about it, for Star knew nothing, and had nothing to say. When the baby's meal was finished and it grew still, she almost forgot to notice what the others were saying, and, so interesting was the crisis of her life, that, leaning back in her chair, she fell into absence, with her eyes on the pot of pansies.

The young man stood with his back to the window; they could not see the expression of his face, because the light was behind. Something fascinated him into forgetting his professional haste. He seemed to show interest in the tale.

"We think the poor woman may perhaps be its grandmother," Richarda was saying; "and although she

was so intoxicated to-day, she was more communicative than before. She told us—but she charged us not to tell. Ought one to respect a drunken confidence?”

“Oh, I should think there is no necessity.” He spoke in his cheerful, encouraging way; but if he was interested in the beggar’s confidence, he was glancing at Star. He was also wondering what meant the dream that lay visibly in her eyes. Whence had the flowers come?

“She said that she was married to a real rich gentleman, but that he had deserted her, and she had not seen him for years. She declared that he lives here now, in the parade. Do you think that can possibly be true?”

“A falsehood, no doubt,” he replied, disposing of Richarda’s question easily. “Very likely she is slandering some one who has tried to befriend her. That is the way with these beggars.”

“It is a dear child,” said Mrs. Thompson wistfully. “Can nothing be done to save it from ruin?”

“That is a very difficult question, Mrs. Thompson,” replied the young man with an important air. “My father has always devoted a part of his time to charitable work, and now, in his old age, he is inclined to think he has done as much harm as good. I don’t agree with him. I think all that sort of thing must be purely good; it must tell in the long run. Much can be done for people in their own homes and otherwise. The town is pretty well off for institutions, although we must enlarge some of them. This child, for instance, can go to the Infants’ Home, and then, if the woman does not claim it, to the Orphanage.

His young energy of benevolence would have enlisted their sympathy more if they had not had an awkward consciousness that they, too, were objects of that activity about which the father felt so hopeless and he so hopeful.

"I always think a baby must be lost in an institution," said Mrs. Thompson. "Among so many, whom have they to love them? They live on love."

"Oh, I regret to say," he laughed, "that they live on milk. The milk bill at that Home is something enormous. I wish they did live on love; it could be got cheaper." He spoke confidently, as if from a larger knowledge of the question than she could possess. "I agree with you, however, so far," he added, "that I believe that in dealing with adult wretches like this drunken woman one must try to show personal sympathy. There is no use trying to put *them* through a mill. I think that is just where my father and men of his generation failed; they were too afraid of coming into close personal sympathy. Personal contact is needed. Don't you think so, Mrs. Thompson?"

Whatever she thought she did not say. She was hardly prepared to follow his energetic conversation; but his appeal to her as one interested with him in work for others soothed the feeling of ruffled pride that had come to her daughters at his first mention of charity. Star had been roused; she lifted her eyes toward him now with a kindlier look than he had yet seen. It was time for him to go; he was not entirely conscious why he remained. He gave it out, on his authority as a doctor, that the baby must not remain there. As there was prospect that the woman would not be fit to care for it for some days, he promised to

try to send some one for it from the Home he had mentioned. Even then he did not go.

"Have you heard," he asked Star, "the extraordinary sequel to the story of the dog?"

No; Star had not read the morning papers. Her eyes brightened now with curiosity, and he, in return, told the story well.

"You know, I suppose, that Mr. Allan, who lives in that house, is the mayor. It seems there was an odd bequest made lately which provided that he should give a certain sum in gold to the people in the county almshouses. He had arranged to do it yesterday, and had two hundred pounds in gold sovereigns and half-sovereigns in the house on Saturday night, and it was stolen."

"Dear me!" said Star, because she must say something. "Who took it?"

"That is just what the police would give a good deal to know. It is the last house burglars would want to attempt, for there were four able-bodied men in it and a large dog; but, of course, while they were all engaged with the dog-fight in the basement, the thief, if he came in with the strange dog, could go up and find the money and walk quietly out at one of the upper doors. If that's what he did it was a tremendously clever trick."

"I saw a policeman near the place," said Star.

"Yes, one came on the scene when the dogs were fighting, and jumped in at the window. He helped to separate them. He saw no one who looked suspicious. He saw the lamplighter, just as you did; and he has been questioned since, but he can tell nothing. It seems he is a half-witted creature, does his work mechanically, and doesn't know one day from another."

They all said it was very strange and a great pity. Bramwell had grown interested in his recital and made further remarks.

“Coin!—a thief who gets coin and leaves no trace behind him is as safe as a gentleman.”

Mrs. Thompson was chiefly anxious to know that the poor pensioners had not lost their dole, and relieved to hear that Mr. Allan would make good the money.

Bramwell went away then briskly. His call had not been long; all that could be said of it was that it might have been shorter. He left them with a cheerful feeling that they had been in interesting contact with the world outside.

“Upon my word,” said Richarda, “he is a most benevolent young man; but as his father before him took to visiting the poor, I suppose he was born with his hand in.”

“It is the fashion now,” said Star. There was the slightest scorn in the word.

Star mused, and was vexed with the perversity of circumstances. Why should this young man wax friendly just when she had risked so much to obtain another friend? And yet what mattered it? The few visits the doctor would pay while her mother must remain in bed offered no real help. It is not those things which we can reasonably say are important which vex most, yet perhaps their importance is known in some unreasoning stratum of mind.

Star trotted the baby, and played with it. A baby is a pretty plaything.

Before Richarda had ceased her lively comments on the doctor, certainly before Bramwell could have had

time to send his messenger, a knock came to the door, and a man, in the apparent haste of anxiety, opened it and looked round. His eye fell on the baby with great relief.

"You are very kind to have kept it," he said, as Star rose with the child in her arms.

He was a middle-aged man, and he held out large, stout hands, and took the child without awkwardness.

"I will take your burden from you," he said.

He did not seem to move very quickly, although he acted without loss of time. They noticed that he looked at and seemed to observe them all in a very kindly way, to bestow on each of them the sort of apology and greeting that can be conveyed in a look. They thought he was going to speak, but he took the child and was gone, Star standing the while surprised and irresolute. She felt that she had lost a toy that was pleasant to hold, that she had no right to keep.

Her mother and Richarda were both speaking. Who was the man? Where had he taken the child? Why had she given it?

Star ran into the street, only to see a cab driving away. Some children told her that "the gentleman" had got into it.

She could only return to wonder with the others at her own precipitation, to surmise with her mother that a respectable-looking, middle-aged man was not likely to have a sinister motive in wanting a beggar's baby, while she also agreed with Richarda that the incident was strange and romantic. But her own life was too strange to her just then to follow the lost child with many thoughts.

Richarda, indeed, had food for conjecture to a very unusual extent.

“Only a few days ago,” she said, “life seemed intolerably dull, and now I can’t get enough time to form opinions about the things that occur.”

Richarda, like most people, thought it important to form opinions.

CHAPTER XV.

MARIAN GOWER spent the afternoon of the preceding Saturday in the dingy Board School, familiarly known as “Babbits,” which stood, on the other side of the elms, opposite the entrance of the old church.

In the large room of this building there had been a winter series of entertainments, on the broad basis of general culture, given to the scholars and their parents. Miss Gower was on the committee of arrangement. She considered it a good work, and so, perhaps, it was.

This afternoon gathering was the closing meeting of the series for that winter, and it had been distinguished by the extra festivity of buns and tea. The audience were at last seated to enjoy what they were told was a feast of a higher sort; and Marian, weary with helping tea, stood at one side and leaned against the wall. The place was full; rough men, who, like her, could not find seats, stood in front and overshadowed her.

It was a fairly large hall for such a place, but bare and dingy. The floor was filled with sitting people.

Round three sides of the lofty walls a little iron gallery ran, on which the schoolboys stood. For economy of space there was an open circular stair of iron twisting up from one corner of the platform to the gallery. On this also little boys sat and stood; some were ruddy and impish; some were fat and dull; some had white, pathetic faces, as though they had been brought into the world to suffer in expiation of some one's sin. They were never quite still—not when prayer was read or music played; there was a rustling and a shuffling among them all the time, sometimes the sharp sound of a kick or an hysterical snigger. The hall was lit by high windows on the outer side, through which, looking up, one might see the mossy arms of the budding elms, the church tower, and the moving April clouds. Marian leaned by the wall that was opposite the windows. That which she saw beyond them—the swinging censer of white cloud, the wind in giant branches, the perfect art of the ancient tower—that, in contrast to the ill-ventilated room, the buns and tea, seemed strangely of a piece with the high beauty of idea and fancy which she and her fellows were trying to bring down to the rough throng. If beauty could elevate, was it not there for them any and every day? She did not pursue the thought; to tired senses thoughts are vague.

There was music. A young girl, who looked as if she had always lived in such surroundings as are seen in the portraits of young girls in picture-galleries, played on a violin. She looked a picture, even there, standing on the dust-coloured platform, and when one looked away from her there was music in the air, as if a pure spirit had somehow got entangled in the close material

atmosphere, and was wailing, entreating, coaxing even with smiles, for its whilom freedom. Even the little boys climbing on the twisted stair—even the ruddy and impish ones—looked different for the moment, less tricky, more earnest, while they heard the wordless song that was about them everywhere. Over the attitudes of the older people there came a perceptible relaxation; the tired workers could rest now without feeling their fatigue, while the fat mayor, who sat on the platform, and had been cross a minute before at the giggling of the boys, looked for the nonce as if in fancy he were sipping good wine or talking to a pretty woman.

When the music stopped the mayor made a speech. He explained to the pupils what exceeding good fortune was theirs to have been born in that nick of time and space when and where so many advantages were bestowed upon them. He asserted that by this happy chance they were being made into much nobler creatures than they would otherwise have been. He explained to the parents that the town in which they lived was most advanced in the art of raising its poor, a fact of which these periodical gatherings were abundant proof. Then, without explanation of what it was to be raised or made a much nobler creature, he slid into compliment to the ladies and gentlemen who, with “indefatigable labour” and “abounding generosity,” had combined to aid in this special work.

Marian did not feel complimented. She winced a little for the self-respect of some manly fellows who stood near her; but they seemed pleased with the speech, so perhaps she was too sensitive for them.

After that a young medical man called Bramwell read a selection from one of the simpler poets. Marian knew Bramwell slightly in his capacity as a doctor; she knew him to be zealous in good works. The girl who had played the violin was his cousin; it was no matter for remark that he should read a poem next.

Yet she did notice him now as she had never done before. He read well, he looked well—very well—as he stood at the side of the platform with the open stair-case full of boyish faces just above his head. He was a beautiful, majestic-looking man, in the full vigour of youth, and he read rhythmic verses about courage, honour, and love in heartfelt tones.

Marian moved her feet, slightly changing her position. Weariness and close air made her thought grow dim. Upon the high windows in the opposite wall the shadow of the knotted branches fell suddenly clear, for above them the fleece of April sky had parted so as to let the sunshine fall, pale, but glad. It seemed fitting that it should fall in a long, dusty shaft upon the young man, as he read so strongly of the most beautiful things of earth; but, above him, the fidgeting, giggling boys on the stair and gallery were still in shadow. Marian fell to wondering whether, by help and effort, they could ever come out of their shade into his light. Again she shifted her feet; her wonder grew less clear, her eyes closed to shut out the light; then suddenly, by one of those tricks which tired nerves sometimes play, the young doctor's face started again into her vision against the reddish blank which closed eyelids create. It was there only a moment; she wondered at it only a moment longer. Had his face really made more im-

pression on her than all things else that she had been looking at? She scorned the idea. Marian did not like men.

Behind the seats at the back of the room was gathered a little crowd of some twenty people, who seemed to have looked in from mere curiosity. Marian turned, with some interest, to see who were there. She noticed one or two clergymen. In front was a young man writing in a note-book, presumably for the benefit of some newspaper. She was rather short-sighted, she did not see these people clearly; but, as she was looking, her attention was called to a face in the corner furthest back of all. It struck her as an odd face, noticeable among its dark surroundings for the very light hair that framed it, noticeable, also, because its owner seemed to be standing on tiptoe in a very strained position. It was so odd that Marian moved a step that way, and, being still obscured by her neighbours so that she did not dream of being seen, put up her glasses and looked hard; but she did not see more, for just then the head went down suddenly, and there was a noise in that part, as of some one stumbling forward.

The reading was finished, and there was applause. Then came more music. Marian, feeling that her part of the work was finished, slipped through a side door and went out into the spring winds.

She did not know that before she went out there was a little disturbance at the back of the hall. The tall, tow-headed man, who had actually been standing on tip-toe, lost balance and came forward on those in front of him. It is not quite fair, in a crowd, that one man should stand on his toes and then fall upon his

fellows. They evidently knew him, and showed temper. "Look out, Tod," said one. "Take care, Tod," said another. The young reporter looked up from his notes and stepped back to the offender's side.

"What are you doing, Tod?" he asked, with the air of a mentor.

"I—I—I fell, Kent."

Kent did not know that his friend had been standing on his toes, but he did not look vastly surprised that he should fall, even when standing on level floor; his face said as much. He did not waste another glance or word, but went on with his scribbling.

CHAPTER XVI.

MARIAN went down the hill, passed out of the narrower streets, and sauntered up the parade, warm now with the full glow of sunshine. She looked what she was—a lady, well-dressed, well-bred, maintaining that entire reserve of demeanour which civilization demands from each individual in a crowded street. She was much more than she looked—a woman of strong natural feelings, in whose heart these emotions, by reason of having no outlet, warred with one another and with overruling reason, producing strange fancies and morbid hopes and fears.

She was conscious of a womanlike and perfect pleasure in the bright faces and gay dresses she saw. She experienced a strong desire to purchase clothes as

bright as any and deck herself therewith, yet she knew she would never do it, for what, thought she, is the use of new feathers when no one is to be pleased? She was accustomed to go through the world desiring, checking her own desires, and remaining unsatisfied. Here was a mortified young mother trying to coax her sturdy three-year-old to stop crying and walk with her. Marian would have liked to aid her in the task, but she passed on, not knowing how such aid would be accepted. An aged lady, with peace upon her face, tottered up and down in the sunlight. Marian longed to offer her arm as support; she would gladly have shared thoughts with one who had passed the conflict of life; but no—on a fashionable thoroughfare, who speaks without introduction? Thus she went on, passing scores of people, akin to her in rank, habit, and opinion; her heart leaped out to one and another with eager speculation, and came back to her, called in like a chidden child. To some she gave the greeting of acquaintance, in a manner reserved and punctilious; she felt no nearer to these than to those whom she had not greeted. Marian was a lonely woman, eager and sensitive to excess because all the force of social instinct within her sweet, womanly heart was doing damage there, as a flood of water will spoil the comeliness of the fairest valley if it find no legitimate channel.

When she neared her own door a spasmodic little lady came up and gave her a tract.

“I have prayed to know which would suit you,” said the tract-giver, thrusting it at her in a frightened way.

Marian had long passed that superficial stage which resents the effort of another to make us better; she

accepted the tract with the ready politeness of good will, but, because she was surprised, she appeared frigid to the little missionary, who went on, feeling chilled.

Marian entered the narrow, fashionable house in which she lived. The prim, unbending housemaid kept her waiting before answering the door, and Marian felt irritated, but it was against her principles to be cross, so she spoke with kind propriety instead. Perhaps the maid was happier for her mistress's forbearance, perhaps not; she did not look impressionable.

As for Marian, she went up into the drawing-room, and sat down to read her tract. It was a relief to her to find the room cool and unoccupied. In the luxury of unaccustomed freedom from restraint, she dropped her hat and reclined in the overhanging window. The window was open to the warm spring air; the venetian blind was dropped to shield the sun. Sounds from the street rose with wonderful clearness to that window, and, thus sitting, in the green glow of the blind, she was roused by hearing her own name.

The lady of the next house stood at her own door with her daughter; a glance through the slats showed Marian that they were arrayed in their best, evidently waiting for some one to take them for a walk. The daughter was fresh from school.

"Mamma," said she, "who is that lady who went in next door?"

Then came her own name, which struck on Marian's ear.

"She is just one of the very numerous old maids in our class of life," said the lady. "She leads an unsatis-

factory life, I fancy, because she has no natural cares or satisfactions."

"Why didn't she get married?"

"Probably she had no chance. She taught school, I believe, for many years. School-governesses have little opportunity of meeting men, for they must either board with the girls or live in their own lodgings. Her health broke down, and she came as a companion to her uncle here. He is a selfish man. I don't suppose she dares to call her soul her own; women who are dependent on their relations rarely do. And that is the reason, May," continued the mother, pointing a moral to adorn the tale, "that I shall expect you to do what you can to get settled as soon as possible. It is so difficult for women to marry nowadays in the upper middle classes, and when a girl loses bloom it is almost impossible."

"I don't care, I'm sure"—the pretty May tossed her words. "I think old maids are good and nice."

"They are so common now that a sentiment has risen up in favour of the state, and I would not disparage it; but a lady's health rarely stands the strain of self-supporting labour, and dependence on the whims and fancies of others is not enviable. Romantic stories about maiden ladies doing good are pleasant reading; but unless they have means, they are not at liberty to do much; and, depend upon it, the most useful lives are those whose family ties compel them to be useful. So be a good child, my daughter, and don't think there is anything particularly delicate in the feeling that makes you resolve to make no special effort to please in society. True refinement consists in recognizing the

facts of life, and making the best of them for ourselves and others. With so many children, your father can't give you an independence."

But here the father alluded to came out—a portly man, who wore a fine coat—and the trio went down the garden path to mingle with the walkers on the pavement.

Marian rose and watched them through the blind. It did not occur to her that she had perhaps done wrong to listen. She did not despise the elder woman's counsel, nor did she envy the young girl's bloom. She watched them because she felt interested, and when her attention returned, she had an odd feeling that she really did not need to bestow consideration upon herself any more, because she and her emotions had been labelled and classified by a competent judge. After all, is not the thinking we give to ourselves always an effort to find out what we are in relation to what is around us? And if this is suddenly done for us, in a concise and correct way, what further need is there of another introspective glance? With some such impulse as this, Marian turned from the window to seek a quieter seat in which to read her tract; but she had not taken more steps than would bring her to the centre of the room when the pathos of it all arrested her. She stood still, lost in a passionate regret for something she could not define.

Yes, it was true; she knew it—had long known it in the way in which we know truths which grow upon us with the years, and which we never sum up in words for our own benefit. Her youth had slipped from her without the joyous excitement of any overmastering

friendship; slipped from her in arduous toil for herself and others, leaving her, not with the modest independence that the same toil and economy would have given a man, but without means of support. The years that were passed had been happy and useful; she had no cause for self-upbraiding; she could not say, "Had I chosen differently," for she had made the best of what choice life had opened to her. What was there to regret? Yet she stood, held and possessed by a regret which seemed to cover everything. Something, in whatever form it might come, which might be described as the natural joy of youth—that she had missed. And now youth was gone! An hour before she would have said "almost gone," reserving to herself great comfort in the indefinite hope that remained; now, enlightened by her neighbour, she knew it was gone.

Tears came unbidden to her eyes; unbidden sorrow swelled within her breast; she clenched her hands and stamped her foot to keep it back. She struck the pretty little foot into the soft rug on which she stood. "I, Marian Gower, am——" She was going to use strong language in her self-scorn, and say "a fool," but she was stopped by calmer reason. Was she foolish to weep because youth had gone by without giving her a chance to be nearest to one human being, without showing her one who could be dearer to her than to the rest? A little child would have been enough; one constant woman friend would have lit her neutral-tinted days with sunshine, as a man's love might have flushed them into roseate glow. Was she a fool to weep because fate had led her quite aside from such comfort, and bidden her take to her heart Benevolence instead

of Love? Or was there anything better, worth the transient passion of a flood of tears?

Yet the flood did not come. Some tears swam in the beautiful eyes; a sob was choked back. So habitual is self-control to such women, that it is harder to weep than to check the tears. She stood almost tranquil, lost in conflicting feeling—pride, that scorned to admit the desire for what it had not; discontent, which dilated on the beauty of what was lacking; strong sense, which said, "Yes, this is a true sorrow, it would be self-deceiving and ignoble to refuse its recognition:" imagination touched lightly upon the ideal love, (for it is always the ideal that we miss,) and memory showed what had been—all this as she stood, stilling her heart and wiping her tears, there alone in the centre of the richly furnished room.

In a sudden flash of pathos she looked at her own hand—such a pretty, pink little hand, which no one had ever praised or held reverently or kissed; nay, and most likely no one ever would. Why had God made it soft and exquisitely moulded? If it were only for the use of general benevolence, surely a rougher, stronger hand would have been better. Such a pity to think of its missing its use! Would its Creator be disappointed? She took it up gently with the other, and raised it to her own lips and kissed it, smiling a little at her own foolishness, smiling with lips that twitched with the tremble of tears. She stood a minute longer, her pretty dewy eyes striving after some infinite strength that would compel resignation; then she put it all aside and took up her actual life just where she had forgotten it for a moment, and went on across the room to a quieter seat in which to read.

The tract was on the duty of Christian love. It was one of those compositions which contain no idea which has not already become an integral part of the working motive of the average mind, and it was expressed in religious language at once trite and figurative. Marian thought she could have written better herself. Her ideas began to shape themselves accordingly, beginning in didactic, schoolmistress fashion—

“If you have no one about you whom you love spontaneously, it is none the less your duty to love. There are two ways of setting about this: you can, if you have opportunity, set yourself to some good work, and let your affection for your kind flow into the energy with which you perform it; or you can address yourself to loving as much as you can all who come in your way, so that the circle of your opportunity will widen as their hearts expand under the influence of your love.”

Thus far she got, and began to argue with her imaginary sermon. “But—but if you are not endowed with winning manners, your efforts become unnatural, and your circle does not widen.” She was coming all too perilously near the tears that a few minutes before she had set aside resolutely. Oh, it was true, what the practical neighbour had implied, that the most loving lives are those whose natural ties oblige them to love; and yet it remains true always that “love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Marian put the tract from her, as she constantly put aside temptations to self-centred thought.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON Monday Marian again sat in that same room alone. Her uncle had seized on the alleviation of pain which the fine weather brought him to be much out at his club and elsewhere. Marian's uncle was a dissipated old man.

Marian sat and read the paper which that day gave publicity to the tale of the dog-fight and the theft of the gold coin in the mayor's house hard by. She read with some excitement and grew nervous; a crime so near came home to her fears as the same event at a distance would not have done.

The report was dramatically given; then followed interesting comments. It was stated that suspicion had fallen on the owner of the dog, a coachman in the neighbouring mews, but the man had been completely exonerated. The writer next inveighed against the popular habit, too common in such cases, of carelessly expressing suspicion of household servants and others who might seem to have an obvious opportunity to commit the theft. In this case it was said that not only was there no real ground of suspicion found as yet against any one, but there was no proof that the introduction of the strange dog to the basement had any connection with the theft. Burglars, it was observed, did not usually take watch-dogs with them, or enter houses in the way to make the most noise and attract the most attention.

Marian, because she had been told not to do it,

instantly fell to suspecting Mr. Allan's servants, and from suspecting them fell into suspicion of her own. Her vague fear and dislike of her uncle's new man-servant, which until now had been undefined, leaped suddenly into form. So peculiar, so different from other servants! Might he not be the accomplice of a gang of thieves who had now begun work? Conjecture ran on, scorning evidence as a companion.

Just then the man himself came into the room, but Marian, avoiding her favourite window-seat, which had brought her so much pain yesterday, had seated herself in the alcove near her uncle's lounge, and Gilchrist, not seeing her in the accustomed place, supposed the room to be empty.

He put some letters on the table in an absent way then, instead of leaving the room, stood lost in thought, very near the place where Marian had stood to stamp out her passion yesterday. Had he been a professional man, or one immersed in family and business cares, he could not have fallen more naturally into an attitude of absence. His hands were clasped behind him, his head bent slightly forward; he seemed, from the slight play of his brows, to be forming plans, to be rejecting some and approving others.

Marian watched, and felt positively frightened. She made a nervous movement.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I thought you were not here." He spoke very much as a gentleman might have spoken to a lady. He did not seem to have that sense of the strangeness of his conduct that she could have wished.

He gave her one of the letters, and set about making

some little arrangements in the room for his master's arrival. She remembered that, more than two weeks before, he had brought her a letter and turned, as he now did, to arrange the window-blinds; the recollection came indistinctly, as when the sensation floats over us that all that is happening to us at the moment has happened in precisely the same way at some former time.

The letter she received this time was encased in the ominous brown envelope of the Dead-letter Office, and, as she tore it with some curiosity, she was startled to find the same letter in her hand that had been sent to her from the Liverpool shipping office on that previous occasion. The envelope addressed to "B. Tod" had the familiar appearance of an old friend. It was open now, and Marian, glancing over the pages, was astonished to find her own address legibly written at the date, and her own name signed at the end.

She was conscious that she made some indefinite sound of ejaculation. Gilchrist came toward her with an expression of concern.

"It is nothing," she said with stiffness. She folded her hand over the letter, and sat motionless till he should be gone.

But he did not go.

"There are two sick ladies," he said abruptly, "who seem to be in very poor circumstances."

"Indeed!"

Marian's manner was very forbidding. He stopped awkwardly, and went on more awkwardly still, but with a certain dignity.

Yes, and you—I have noticed that you have such a desire to be doing good——"

“ ‘ Desire to be doing ’—was that all ? ” thought Marian. Did he suppose that she, who was so busy in good works, really did no good ? He had not said that, but possibly his manner betrayed his mind.

“ I thought, perhaps—— ” he went on.

But here Marian’s surprise at his unexpected address gave way to evident disapproval. Her nervous prejudice against men had made her keep this serving-man at an extreme distance, and now it seemed to her that his presumption was as great as the subject of his talk was surprising.

Her air was inquisitorial. “ Yes, Gilchrist ; and how have you heard of these ladies ? ”

“ I happened to go into their room this morning. I have heard of them as being kind to a poor woman.”

“ What was your errand to their room ? ”

“ I ”—a pause—“ had rather not go into that now.” He took up his words where she had interrupted him. “ I thought, perhaps, you might be willing to visit them.”

“ I am sorry, Gilchrist, that my time is entirely occupied with my own district. I cannot do more than I do.”

Manner added, “ You may leave me,” and he went. As he clumsily opened and shut the door, she heard him sigh quietly. The irritating idea remained with her that he had wished to do good to her, rather than to others. That this was inconsistent with the fear that he was a hypocrite and a disguised criminal she partly recognized, and yet, with fine inconsistency, she cherished both grievances against him. It was what she called her “ cross,” to live in the same house with this servant and her uncle.

Now, when the door was shut, she unfolded the letter

again, with curiosity not unfearful. It was not in her handwriting, nor in any imitation of it, but, from the minuteness of the address and name, it was evident it purported to be from no one but herself; and, moreover, it was a sort of love-letter, for it began, "Beloved Tod."

Marian eyed these words askance, and plunged on into a rather long letter, written in a song-like style, as if some one had been making a weak attempt at blank verse and written it down as prose. It was an ecstatic strain of welcome to a young man supposed to be coming from New York, and, although diffuse and silly, it showed some appreciation of the charm of nature and the beauty of figurative language. Toward the end it described the entrance into harbour of the home-coming ship. "And," said the letter, "the sun will shine and the waves sparkle to greet you. Think then that, could I be there, my eyes would sparkle with truer joy and my smile would beam more brightly to see thee, beloved, once more. Yet to me is given no such gracious opportunity to welcome you home—neither at the ship nor at the poverty-stricken abode of Mrs. Couples, in the South Road (a worthy woman, but without soul). There you must live alone in your poverty, while I dwell alone in my wealth, and 'never, never' is written upon our earthly years. This one line I write to greet you on your lonely way and say welcome, thrice welcome home again, dear Tod."

Marian laughed, in spite of her dismay. The letter was written in clerkly style, her own name in the signature most legible of all.

She read it again, and wondered more and laughed

less. So curious a mixture of that which was poetical and that which was absurd, that which showed education and that which betrayed ignorance, could not come under her eye, even in the bewildering and offensive form of a love letter which she had never written, and yet which claimed her as its author, without exciting an interest in the writer beyond the mere indignation which the impudence evoked.

Who had written it? and if the post had not delayed and it had, according to intention, been delivered to this man called Tod on the in-coming ship, what would have been the result? Who was this Tod? Who had desired to mislead him by such a letter? Who was the worthy, but soulless, Mrs. Couples? At one moment Marian's eyes brightened with amusement, the next her cheek flushed with annoyance. Some one was clearly mad; but who? And what mischief might this madness do? The first time she had received the letter she had sent it back with a certain feeling of displeasure, although not knowing how much reason she had for offence; now that it had come back like a fate, it was necessary to do more than scorn it. Marian was too energetic, too long accustomed to manage her own affairs, to dream for a moment of letting this impudence pass unchallenged if she could help it. She was sitting thus, thinking how she might try to trace the writer, when there was the noise of arrival in the hall below.

She could think no longer. She went to the head of the stair to watch her uncle's slow ascent, as he was painfully helped up by his men.

Often as she had watched the proceeding, it never before struck her as so sad in its lack of all nobler

elements of life. The irascible and profane old sufferer was being half-dragged, half-lifted up step by step by Gilchrist and the coachman. His lawyer, a frequent attendant, walked behind.

What beauty lies in the mystery of pain when the suffering spirit has no thought of patience or resignation? when the aid that it compels is fee'd with gold, evoking neither pity on the one side, nor gratitude on the other?

The light fell softly through the tinted skylight down the well of the narrow house. Tall flowers in costly pots ornamented the ascent. As Marian looked down she was conscious of a harmony which pleased the sense of sight in the motion and figures of the men as they made slow way up the curving stair—the two strong, common men in strenuous action; the invalid, with his elegant, dissipated air, the white hanging hands, the face flushed with fever, distorted with pain and impatience, but handsome still; and the keen, polite man of the world behind. It was a picture interesting and pleasing to the realistic and undidactic eye; but higher harmony was lacking. As for some hint of moral beauty, of the use of suffering, of the honesty of labour, even of the pleasure of fancy, as well might this woman, whose heart still felt very young within her, and full of longing after the higher happiness, look for roses on a snow-covered moor as look for it here; at least, so she thought. She only perceived now that an additional element of baseness was added to the oft-rehearsed scene. Her uncle, in celebration of his outing, had indulged in the forbidden excess of wine. A certain tinge of good-humoured jocularities was added to his usual complaints.

“Ho, Marian,” on seeing her above, “I’ve bought my house.” Then came an interval of groans and angry ejaculations. “Yes, completed the purchase, bought it out and out. No haggling. You’ll play the fine lady, walking in your own park, now! Ha!”

“It is not far out of town,” said the lawyer. Perhaps he pitied her, if his pity for her uncle was feigned. “You will not be sequestered; one can drive out in ten minutes by the South Road.”

““South Road,” repeated Marian. The words seemed an echo of something in her mind. “I don’t think I have ever been on that road,” she said to the lawyer.

“Ah,” said he, “you are destined to know it well!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

To be energetic and business-like in pursuance of a certain end does not always (in a woman at least) preclude a large amount of agitation in the matter. Marian never thought of shirking the duty of investigating, if possible, the mystery of the letter; she did not like the investigation.

A glance at the Directory showed her that there was truly a Mrs. Couples on the South Road, who let “apartments.” Her next step was to find the Church district-visitor in that region, and make inquiries as to the standing, religious and otherwise, of the house and its inmates. The information she thus gained, although not large, satisfied her that there was a young man

called Tod living there, and that she would risk nothing in seeking a personal interview with him. She saw no other way of proceeding further. She waited an opportunity to make her visit at such time as she might find him.

Before she found this opportunity Marian had twice been out to inspect the furnishing of her uncle's new house, and four times she had driven up and down the dusty suburban road that led to it. This road assumed a very different aspect to Marian from what it had done to Esther Thompson. Star, coming from low-roofed, gloomy quarters, her eyes enamoured of the April morning, her heart beating with the excitement of her risky little venture on the sea of fate, her pulses full with the health of youth, had seen much to attract in a road which seemed so good-naturedly to lend its width and length to give room and air and light to humble dwellings. Her glance had naturally sought the garden-plots trim with flowers, rather than those which were neglected, and rested longer on windows which showed clean curtains than on those where dirty blinds hung askew. Coming as far as Mrs. Couples' door, she had thence turned back, thus traversing only that beginning of the road built up like a street. She had hardly dared to glance beyond, where, in the level distance, her eye might have caught the dim outline of trees and fields, where she knew that cottage stood which Hubert Kent had taken. Because she had not dared to look very nearly at this open end of the road it continued to wear a much more rural aspect in her idea than in the reality. Marian, driving in the afternoon sun, looked at the houses through the dust raised by horses and wheels,

and noticed, with quiet disgust, all the untidiness and inelegance of the place and its inhabitants. She watched, with a sort of annoyed fascination, for the number of Mrs. Couples' house; but her uncle was with her, and, with all the constraint of close companionship in which there is no confidence, she feared to let her eyes rest on the house a moment lest he should remark it. To her hasty glance even the carefully tended wallflower and the lilac so early in leaf appeared vulgar and common. Further on she looked at the small row of insignificant houses which formed the end of town in that direction, and remarked to her uncle that whoever lived in them would, in future, be their nearest neighbours.

"Neighbours!" he said, elevating his eyebrows; "not till we or they fall among thieves."

"It is nice," she pursued, taking no notice of his loftiness, "to see that nowadays they are building even working-men's cottages with an attempt at good taste. See, the windows are latticed, and there is a little cornice above each door."

But before she had finished they had got beyond this little brick row, and in a minute more were rolling up the short avenue that led to the old house in the park, so soon to be her home.

A few days after Marian sought the South Road again on foot, at about seven in the bright spring evening. Her mind was perturbed by dislike of her errand. The boys and girls playing about were rude and noisy; the whole population had come to their windows and doors to enjoy the fine weather, and it seemed to her sensitive nerves that they were there partly to gaze at her.

When, at last, she stood at Mrs. Couples's gate, she was particularly distressed at what seemed a lack of privacy in the position of the household. There was a young man sowing annuals in the front border; he worked as one at home who was working for pleasure. Outside the doorstep a very stout woman was sitting on a broad wooden chair, having a curious look as though she and the chair had been planted and were immovable.

Marian hesitated at the gate. She had come fully aware that the course she pursued must depend somewhat on circumstances, and circumstances seemed strangely unpropitious for performing her mission without attracting remark. But, though her nervous heart was hesitant, her attitude was decisive in the extreme; and, moreover, she had donned her most dignified garments, for, like other sensible people, she knew that there is a language of dress. She observed that the young man gardening had a dark, rather attractive face and firmly knit figure. He came toward her inquiringly.

"There is some one of the name of Tod living here?" Marian appeared to refer to an envelope she carried in her hand to give her the name. It was a nervous feint.

"Yes." He set the gate open.

"Are you ——" she began. "Is that your name?"

"Oh no," cheerfully, and with evident interest in her and her errand. Then he signified that the man wanted was indoors, and that he would be willing to bring him out.

There was that in his face which made her feel that to have him as an onlooker in the coming interview

would be unendurable. She refused his aid, and pushed on to speak to the woman at the door. The young man went back to his flower-beds with a good-humoured indifference to her apparent haughtiness, and the woman did not stir, but looked at her, as she came close, with a satisfied smile.

“Mr. Tod? Yes, he’s in; he’s after having his tea—yes.”

Mrs. Couples was more communicative and less breathless when sitting than when standing. She had the same inward way of going on with whatever she said in a happy murmur behind the smile until she said the next thing, and her voice and smile were caressing. To her Marian tried to speak more affably. She was anxious to obtain as much information as might be about this Tod before coming to a personal dealing with him; but, more willing to be told than to ask, she showed no impatience at the even flow of talk.

“He’s got the back rooms, being less able to pay. Yes, I’m blessed in my lodgers; yes, that’s him playing music now; you’ll hear if you listen.”

Amid the confused sounds of the street Marian began to distinguish the notes of some stringed instrument going tink-a-tink to the time, rather than tune, of some melody.

“I am speaking to Mrs. Couples?” said Marian, to encourage loquacity; but it ran in the wrong direction.

“Yes, I’m Mrs. Couples; yes. And that’s Mr. Kent—a very nice young man, too.” But, having thus directed Marian’s glance again toward Hubert, she added in what was, or what seemed to Marian’s excited fancy to be, a tone of hasty caution, “But he’s going to be married

quite soon ; he was asked in church last Sunday. Yes, and I never knew. And the girl coming to see him at the door, so pretty—just very much as you are coming now, m'am ; and me never knowing what's up. Well, well—a pretty young thing, too—yes, yes."

Poor Marian ! She had no ill-feeling toward these people, because they were below her in station ; but any one, to have seen her, would have thought her the impersonation of pride, so rigid and frigid did her manner grow under Mrs. Couples's soft murmuring.

"Has Mr. Tod been long with you ?"

But the speeches of Mrs. Couples overlapped one another, and it was some time before the last question found its way into the tenor of her thought. "Not but what Mr. Tod is as good in his own way ; yes, in his own way. Fond of the harts, he is—very fond, yes. But Mr. Kent leaving, I'm in wants now of a nice young gentleman to take his place, the house being rather copious for me alone—yes, rather copious, yes. He's been with me more than a twelve-month, dear ; that was what you wanted to know—over a twelve-month—yes."

"I wish to speak to Mr. Tod a few minutes on a mere matter of business. I am rather in haste."

"Yes ; you wish to speak to him—yes. Would you like Mr. Kent to step in with you ?"

"It is not necessary." Marian put the unconscious emphasis of fright into the words.

"Yes. Well, you wouldn't like Mr. Kent to step in with you, dear ? I'm not lively ; I'm not as spry as I was when thinner. Yes, then perhaps you would go in yourself, dear, the door at the end of the lobby—yes, you'll know by the music."

Marian moved into the house with alacrity. She had only a few steps to take from the open door, but the back of the lobby was dark and, had it not been for the suggestion that she would know where Tod was by the music, Marian would have been at a loss which inner door to choose. As it was, the steady tink-a-tink of a cheap banjo left her in no doubt, and she knocked.

There was no cessation in that which by courtesy might be called a melody.

"Come in," said a voice in rapt tones, and the music continued.

Marian stood still, indignant, irresolute. Then she knocked again in more peremptory fashion.

"Come in," bawled the same voice, and still the notes tinkled on.

Marian opened the door, giving it a sharp push so that it swung wide. She took no step in advance, but stood still in the lobby, now well lighted from the west window of the room.

It was a small room, containing only humble sitting-room furniture, and there was the disorder of a dressing-room about it; but the most conspicuous object was a slight, fair-haired man, coat and shoes off, sitting on the side of a high box, playing upon the instrument to which she had been listening, or, at least, he had been playing; for when she swung the door with impatient push, he stopped his music and gazed at her, his fingers still upon the strings, his blue eyes wide and his full baby mouth slightly open.

"Oh, my!" said he.

As for Marian, she could not, for a moment, find even two short words to say. She put up her eyeglasses and,

with her stiffest expression, regarded this apparition of a young man in *deshabillé*, seated with stockinged feet tucked up under the side of the uncomfortable-looking seat, so that his knees might come high enough to form a rest for the banjo he was caressing.

“Oh!” said Tod again. This time it was a sort of groan. He did not rise, but glanced hopelessly at his boots and coat, which were lying a little way from him; for how could a man with a taste for the beautiful put on coat and boots with any grace while a lady is looking on?

“I beg your pardon,” she began severely; “I came to inquire—ah, is your name”—here she weakly feigned again to refer to the envelope—“is your name ‘B. Tod’?”

But when she had had the relief of speaking severely, when her eyes had had the instant's rest of looking down at the familiar envelope and she raised them again, she saw more in the scene than had at first presented itself. Out of the window whence came the glow of light, there were green fields and a leafing plane tree to be seen, and, beyond the further roofs, the exquisite calm of the fading sunset. It was to this scene that the weak-faced man had turned himself. Preferring it to the easy sociability of the street, and perched on his high seat that he might have a better view, he was paying the tribute of melody to the dying day as nobly, perhaps, if not as musically, as the most venerable priest of Apollo could have done. It flashed across her that in this scene there was an odd likeness to the letter she held; here again was that same confusion of discordant elements, and surely here, however

absurd the confusion might be, there was effort after something not all ignoble. She only felt this indistinctly, yet, in that moment, the humanity in her was touched and brought into play; she was no longer a woman merely defending her right, no longer merely a cultured mind looking down, critical and displeased, at minds beneath her. She began to forget herself, her dignity, and her discomfort; and, in the first beginning of this oblivion, she was conscious of a nervous tendency to inward laughter, so very ridiculous was the effort the young man was evidently making to decide whether it would be more elegant to continue without his boots, or to put them on before her. But Marian could not stoop to consider this problem with him. She spoke quickly.

“Did you make a voyage from America lately? Is this envelope addressed to you?”

He came towards her now slowly, as if drawn by a spell which caused him to forget the problem concerning the boots in a deeper source of concern. He stood humbly a pace from her and craned his neck over to look at the letter.

“Beg pardon, 'pon my life,” he whispered earnestly; and, suddenly taking the letter, he concealed it in his pocket, as if very anxious to put something he was ashamed of out of her sight.

Marian could only look her astonishment at his word and manner, and, above all, at this rapid disappearance of a document about which she had intended to make leisurely judicial inquiry. But, receiving no intelligible answer to her glance, she went on severely with the words she had prepared.

“It was sent to me first from the shipping-office, to

whose care it is directed, whither I returned it, disclaiming all knowledge of it. Now it has come to me from the Dead-letter Office."

"Very sorry, 'pon my life," he said again, looking at her so seriously the while that she almost wished he would relax into an appearance of less intense concern.

"I saw, to my extreme surprise and displeasure, that the letter bears my own address and signature," she continued, "and, as it also contained some indication of where you were to be found, I thought it better to ask if you could explain it instead of putting such a foolish matter in the hands of a lawyer. Of course, if you cannot explain it, that will be my only course."

She had all the talking to herself; he seemed too distressed to speak.

"Do you know something about the letter? Did you expect to receive it? Are you aware that I never wrote it?"

"Deeply, painfully aware." The words came with such an energy of trouble that, in spite of herself, she felt sorry for him, although she did not know on what grounds.

"Who did write it?"

He came half a step nearer, and put his head a little nearer still.

"I did," he whispered.

"You wrote it!"—in astonishment. "To yourself?"

"I wrote it to myself"—still in a whisper, and with a fearful look down the lobby, lest the words might go outward in return for the cheerful street sounds that were entering.

"Why did you do it?" asked Marian. She spoke

now as in old days she had spoken to the delinquents of the schoolroom, not angrily, but with displeased authority.

"There's a table on the ship, you know"—he was speaking now in a mild, explanatory way—"in the saloon near the captain's table, and when the ship touches Queenstown, the letters that have come to meet the passengers—it is so awfully jolly, you know, to see a letter lying there addressed to one's self; but I never did," with a sigh. "Many of the fellows in the travelling line like myself, get them"—here another sigh.

"And so," with sudden scorn, "you wrote a letter that you might show to your companions and deceive them into supposing that a lady living on the parade had written to you."

"'Pon my life," looking at her with weak sincerity, "I never meant that living soul should see it."

"You could not have hoped to deceive yourself."

"It was a melancholy attempt," he said.

"At self-deception?" She was too absorbed to notice how pitiless was her authoritative catechism.

"At self-deception." The words came like an echo that had caught the trick of human sorrow.

It is the habit of the enlightened schoolmistress to invariably administer encouragement with punishment. From mere habit now, having probed the depth of the sinner's wickedness, her manner took a more benevolent tone.

"Does no one ever write to you? Have you no friends?"

He glanced, perhaps unconsciously, but pathetically enough, at the cheap, old banjo, and at the sunset.

“None I could have a taste in common with.”

He was certainly a very melancholy object. Marian began automatically to administer advice as if she had come there to benefit him.

“I think no one in the world is so placed that they can find no congenial friends; but you ought to try to sympathize with their tastes as well as expect them to have tastes in common with you. It is extremely foolish to write letters to yourself; people will think you mad if you do. Where did you get my name and address?”

“At Babbits. I have seen you often at Babbits.”

He turned his face slightly to the wall as he stood by the door lintel. Some recollection or feeling seemed to be too much for him, but she had not the most distant suspicion what it was. She paused a moment to consider how she should conclude; it was hardly a case in which to threaten the law; it seemed almost too slight to provoke severe language.

“You must never do it again,” she said.

He turned towards her again with a shamefaced, but anxious air.

“There was no thought—’pon my life, there wasn’t—of anything matrimonial.”

“Of course not,” said Marian slightly. She did not allow herself to feel angry as the meaning of his words entered her mind, because she scorned them so utterly. In a moment she continued, “Give me the letter. I will burn it.”

He gave it slowly, compelled by invisible force.

‘Now, you must promise, on your honour, not to do it again. If anything of the sort happened again, I should be obliged to take legal advice.’”

She went back to the door feeling that he was earnestly watching her retreating figure with the same serious, blue eyes in whose regard there had been that degree of trouble and shame that had won from her, on the whole, the credence that their owner was not mad but only foolish. She felt pity for him, but it came with a gush of amusement also, so, before she emerged upon the scene of Mrs. Couples's evening airing, and Kent's gardening, there was an ominous twitching about her mouth, a very roguish and pretty twitching it was, and made her look ten years younger; for laughter that rises unbidden, forbidden, to eyes and lips, comes, as true tears come, from the real life, and betrays the presence of that inner personality to which years make no difference.

She had the impression, as she passed, that Mrs. Couples said "Good evening," and went on saying it in a quiet way till she was out of hearing. Kent opened the gate again for her, and Marian supposed that this episode in her life was finished.

CHAPTER XIX.

YOUNG Dr. Bramwell sat by Mrs. Thompson's bedside. He toyed with his gloves as he talked, and his shining boots moved now and then on the bare floor. There was the colourlessness of poverty and age about the bed and its occupant; everything was worn and faded, light in colour only because it was clean. There was

nothing colourless about the young doctor; there was richness of colour in the ruddy brown of his beard; there was the gloss of opulence on his clothes; there was the full tide of strength and manly purpose in his voice and manner.

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Thompson. She spoke as if weary of an unpleasant subject. She was propped up with pillows. There was beauty and strength in her face also, as she looked at the young man kindly, but it was of a sort which could not be compared—as the beauty of a prophet’s message could not be compared to the physical beauty of the land to which it is sent.

“He came to see me himself, as I told you, and that was so very straightforward.” Bramwell spoke as if urging a rejected plea, although the only answer to his report about Hubert Kent had been that quiet “Thank you.” “And really, everything that I heard about him was most unexceptionable. Our Orphanage, our town, has reason to be proud of a lad who can push his way as he has done.”

There was a pause, filled up by an expression of wistful pain on the invalid’s face.

“And I need not say to you, Mrs. Thompson,” he continued, but stopped diffidently, “with your experience of the world, I need not say to you that the young man—that Kent, in his devotion to your daughter, has shown—is showing, I should say, perhaps—is showing a degree—that is, a generosity—not altogether common.”

Why was it so difficult for him to hint to this poor woman that the young man who offered to take her and her crippled daughter home with his wife was benevolent in doing so?

A curious smile came over her face, as if she had

some hidden thought as to who it was who was really showing generosity, but she said—

“You are right; he has made generous promises.”

“I should not feel the least doubt, from what I have seen of him, that he will fulfil them—not that he attempted to recommend himself to me, or, in fact, spoke of the matter at all.”

He stopped as if he might have said more, but she made a slight gesture with her hand as if putting aside the subject.

He rose and, before taking leave, went over to the other side of the room where Richarda lay silent, listening and watching.

“Well, and how are you to-day?” His eyes lit up with a light that seemed to betoken great personal interest; but perhaps it was his habit to let it come there when he spoke kindly. He certainly became interested in her or her illness as he looked down at the pale, intelligent face, for he held the hand she had extended to him, and sat down to feel the pulse. It was the first time he had talked with Richarda, as they both remarked when he left.

“He is really kind,” said the girl, as if pondering.

The mother answered with a sigh that was almost a groan.

“You feel, mamma, that he is more like what Star’s lover ought to be.”

The mother did not answer, yet the daughter who knew her best seemed to know what the answer would have been.

“But, you see, mamma, he has not made love to Star and the other one has.”

There was silence again, only broken by the mother's sigh. Bereavement, illness, poverty, she had borne meekly, bending with humble cheerfulness to the will of Heaven; but now she felt, and knew not why, that she must muster her forces to oppose the trouble that was threatening.

Afterwards Star came in, and brought a pennyworth of violets. She sat where the doctor had sat by the bedside.

"Oh, my daughter," the mother entreated, opening her mouth for the first time on the all-important issue between them, "My daughter, I wish you would give this up."

"Has the doctor been here?" asked Star, startled. "Did he tell you what he had heard?"

"Yes."

Star paled visibly. "And he says something against——"

"No, nothing against him; everything in his favour; but, my daughter, such inquiry only touches the most outward part of a man's life."

"Of course; but it was you who had it made, mother, to satisfy yourself. I was content before."

"Why were you content?" The mother looked keenly.

Star coloured and dropped her eyes beneath the glance. Had she been actuated in her choice of Hubert only by motives of love, she could not now have acted otherwise. She was not thinking of deceit, yet the deception was complete.

"I cannot understand it,"—the mother spoke in reproachful astonishment—"how you could yield so quickly to a stranger's wooing."

“Oh, mother——” She stopped in distress.

“What is it?”

No answer.

“My Esther, if you think to benefit me and Richarda by this marriage, we were far happier before. No advantage of a better house and greater comfort could help us if we were not happy about you. We have been well off together here, my darling. It is a hardship, I know, to have you always at work all day, and there is much that we would like changed; but, my dear, if we go on doing what is right, and patiently bearing our little difficulties, God will provide for us in His own time.”

“Oh,” she cried, passionately, “I can’t let you stay here; it will kill you, and I can’t get on at the shop.”

“I know the hardest part of the trial falls on you”—she ignored the first part of the sentence, and spoke pityingly; “but you have always said you liked the work.”

“Yes, I *said* so,” she said bitterly. “While it was necessary, I tried to make you think I liked it, and I tried to make my words true by forcing myself to make the best of it.”

“Has it been so hard, love?”

“Oh, you don’t know. I *can’t* do it. I keep forgetting and making mistakes in the figures. I can’t do the work smartly enough; and then they speak so rudely to me.”

“Have they been rude to you?” The tone of dismay betrayed how little the mother, in the warmth of her own tenderness, knew of the chilly world.

“Yes—no—at least, not what they call rude, but I

cannot get accustomed to it; and girls much younger than I am can do the work much better. I can never learn the business, I know I can't."

The mother waited, perhaps, to seek some heavenly direction before she answered.

"Have you not allowed a number of little grievances to accumulate and rankle in your mind until you are discouraged, dear child? To the Christian there should be no such word as discouragement."

Star did not answer.

"You will think, perhaps, it is easy for me lying here helpless to encourage you to work for us."

"I don't." She spoke tersely, hoarsely, in her distress. "I know quite well the worst falls on you."

"Perhaps, dearie, we could get some other work you would like better."

"Oh, mother, mother!" she burst out, "don't you see you cannot undo what is done. All my life you and father have trained me to live at home, to do the home work; now I can do that, but nothing else. I am not unwilling to work, but it would take years for me to learn any trade well enough to earn sufficient to keep you. At the shop they give me my salary partly out of pity for you and Richarda; but why should I get more than girls who have been with them to learn the business, and are worth far more to them than I am? It is just a way of taking charity, and they have a right to scold when I make mistakes. The other girls have a right to dislike me."

"I had no idea of this."

"There was no use telling you when there was no way out of it; but now there is a way." The girl spoke

resolutely, though her words came brokenly, and her breath was quick with emotion. "We must look at things as they are, not as they ought to be. Here we are placed so that I must—absolutely *must*—earn a living for myself and you and Richarda, if we are not to be separated and put in different charity homes—you admit that, mother? And I have no wonderful genius for doing anything suddenly when I have had no training for it." There was interrogation in her voice, as if each statement claimed admission before she went on. "And there is but one thing that I have been trained for. You know you and father always called me a home-bird. You were proud because I liked house-work better than fine accomplishments. You did not approve of girls leaving home and pushing into independent positions. You thought that woman's work was at home. I have heard father say so scores of times."

"My daughter"—oh, the sadness of the gentle face!—"we did our best according to our knowledge; we could not know what was in the future."

"I am not reproaching you, mother—how could I? but what I say is true. There is only one way in which I know how to be really useful. You have trained me to be a good wife. Let me be a wife, and I shall feel that, by being more to my husband than any other girl he would be likely to get could be, I earn the right to have you and Richarda with me."

Star had done; she was not given to argument; her putting of the case welled up from that inner part of her where thought had been working, perforce, during the troublous experience of their poverty. Her words

had come in a little torrent. Now she moved forward, and would have caressed her mother in silence. But the mother turned her face to the wall, and Star saw her tremble with grief, and knew that, in having no contradiction to give, her mother was drinking the bitterest dregs of her cup of life's sorrow.

"Mother, mother," she said, breathing her heart's love in the words; but they seemed to return to her, shut out from a struggle of soul of which she was too young to realize the depth. Her mother's life was in touch with a spiritual world, of which she had little cognizance, but she knew that this struggle was not between earthly wishes and opposing circumstances, but between an agonized spirit and the cloud of sorrow that shut out the face of God. With her heart, rather than with her ears, she seemed to hear the involuntary cry, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

She sat appalled and frightened. Would death, which was always hovering so near the frail, physical part of the mother she loved so passionately, intervene now, and, snatching the sorrow-stricken spirit from the earthly side of the cloud, deprive her for ever of the consent and blessing she had been trying to obtain? The fear seemed to make all the material good which her young, healthy life coveted turn to ashes before her sight, so dearly she loved her mother. But, in the passionate desire to give the comfort which only could avail to heal the wound she had made, she became oblivious to the voice of truth in her own heart. She said what she did not believe, without realizing whether she believed it or not.

"Mother"—because she was completely carried away

by the subtle psychological force of her mother's struggle, her tones seemed to rise from the triumph of a spiritual faith—"you said God would provide—I think He has provided. Just when we needed it most, the help came. I was nearly in despair the first day I saw Hubert, and he has been kinder to me than I could have believed. Why won't you accept Hubert's love and kindness as God's way of helping us, and thank Him for it?"

Mrs. Thompson slowly turned to her daughter, a look of new comfort dawning on her face.

"If I thought you really felt about it in that way, Star"—doubtfully, but with hope.

"I do, mother, indeed I do." We are so little the masters of our own minds that, at the moment, she fully believed her words. "How else could it all come about so wonderfully?"

Gradually Star realized that the only obstacle that lay in the way of her marriage was removed. Her mother, although not glad, was reconciled. Star was not happier. Hitherto she had felt herself to be leaning upon a barrier, and, although the attitude of leaning had been the effort to push it down, the barrier had still been a support; now it had fallen.

CHAPTER XX.

HUBERT came again on Sunday afternoon. Mrs. Thompson was able to be up and receive him. Afterwards he took Star out for a walk. It seemed right that she should go with him, and she went mechanically ; but when they were out in the sweet May weather she felt, not happy, but wretched. Her mother's reception of Hubert as a son-in-law had had a note of solemnity in it which, coming in addition to its train of attendant circumstance, had unintended force to bruise the daughter's heart. A mood of nameless, wordless misery, the result, no doubt, partly of physical reaction from excitement, oppressed her. She walked by his side, answering him as she could on common topics, turning aside her face to hide the tears that, in spite of every effort, lay in her eyes. It was one of those moods when all the future looks colourless, all the present worthless, all the past pathetic. It came upon her like a fog ; she could not control its passage over her heart, but she tried to hide it from him.

After walking in this melancholy way for half an hour, they sat down in a lonely corner of the square. It chanced to be the same bench on which Star had sat the day that she answered the advertisement, and a vivid recollection of that time, a forced acknowledgment that her daring experiment had turned out better than she might have expected, served to turn the tide of her mood ; she began to feel more

reasonable. She looked before her at the young, unfolding sycamore leaves and their shadow on the path. The sparrows were chirping on the railing, as they had chirped that April day only three weeks before.

“Well,” she said, with a sigh, “I suppose we may as well try to be happy.”

“If you could try to be rather happier,” he said, “it would be pleasanter for me.” He said it in a quiet, practical way, without tone of reproach.

She felt reproached. “I did not mean to be disagreeable. I—I was trying to be nice.”

“Oh, it does not matter,” he said hastily.

He was not given to love-making evidently. His manner had always practical, business-like quiet that suggested sense rather than sentiment. He said no more for a little while, apparently because he did not know what to say. The little cock-sparrow, bickering with its mate on the dusty edge of the road, seemed better able to conduct a love affair.

Star sat a little way from him, nervously moving her shabbily gloved hands as they lay on her lap. But, as she sat, the tale of the gracious young summer made its way into her heart, and the gloom was gradually dispelled.

“I am sorry I seemed unhappy,” she said in sincere apology. “I do not know why I felt so; I could not help it.”

“Oh, it did not signify in the least,” he said,—“at least, I mean as far as I am concerned.” He moved a little nearer, but kept his eye on the sparrows.

Each was a little afraid of the coming conversation, for they both knew that the how and when of their

marriage must be discussed and settled, and the arrangements of the home that they were to possess together. Yet he was too practical to hesitate long.

“I have told Mrs. Couples that I should be leaving her a week from next Wednesday,” he remarked casually.

“Yes,” she faltered.

“I thought, you know, that we might be married that day.”

“Oh, indeed,” she said faintly.

Then he plunged on bravely to explain to her all about the cottage he had taken and was furnishing. He had the whole plan of its arrangement very clearly in his mind, and he told her how the rooms were placed, and how they were to be occupied—all the details.

In speaking of this cottage, they had widely different pictures in their minds; he thought of one house in a row of humble brick dwellings; in her mind, the very word “cottage” raised an indefinite notion of all that was rural and picturesque. Perhaps, as they talked on, there was much the same discrepancy in their interpretation of other words and phrases. The coinage of words has not a fixed value; our language is to us just what habit and association have made it; and these two waifs might almost as well, had they but known it, have come suddenly together with different languages, so few were the ideas that had common quality in their minds.

As he talked, Star had jealous ear for one element in his arrangements—the comfort of her mother and sister, and she could not but be pleased and touched to find, although he laid no stress upon the fact, that their comfort was considered first in everything. It seemed

only natural to her that he should be generous to them. Had she been in his place she would have done the same. Still, human nature is so constituted that it feels far more grateful for what is spontaneous and natural than for what evinces effort.

“You are very good, Hubert,” she said.

When he understood to what she referred, he explained, in a matter-of-fact way, that a bargain was a bargain, that he hoped he would not be guilty of breaking one, that to do all that was in his power for the two invalids was the condition on which he got her for a wife. “And you are very pretty,” he added with hesitation.

“I don’t think I am,” said Star, and then she looked down, and her fingers began to fidget themselves together. Her cheeks were very rosy; her chestnut hair caressed their roses with its breeze-blown disorder. Her black gown was rusty; her hat had been negligently put on in the unhappy mood in which she had come out with him. Hubert looked at her critically. She was aware of nothing but a great bashfulness. The sparrows hopped on the railing, and ruffled their little feathers in the dust of the path. The young leaves of the tree hung bright green over all.

“You see,” said he, “you are more of a lady—altogether *more* of a girl, than I could have got any other way.”

“Yes,” said Star, in the involuntary way in which one says something to a tone that seems to demand assent. She felt too confused by the first sudden reference to herself to notice his further words.

He seemed satisfied with the agreement that ap-

peared to have been reached on the point, and lounged a little nearer to her on the bench.

“I took for granted,” he said after a bit, “that your prejudices would make you want to have the ceremony in church.”

“The wedding, you mean? Very often in America we have them in the house; but I supposed here one had to go to church.”

“Yes; but you want a clergyman—to have it done religiously?”

“How else?”—with eyes of distressed wonder.

“Oh, we could have gone to the registrar, you know. It would have been less trouble.”

She did not know. He had to explain to her what a registrar's office was, and she was distressed even to know that any one had ever been married in such a way, pained with a vague fear she could not express that he should think such a thing possible for himself, although, in deference to her, he had chosen otherwise.

He went on to arrange that they should go to the parish church together on the Wednesday in question, and then drive her mother and Richarda and all the family possessions to the new house.

“I could have got a holiday, and taken you out of town for a week,” he said; “but I know you would not want to leave them, and would rather spend the money some other way.”

She made no answer. She was so appalled by this near view of her marriage that she sat trembling under the excitement it gave her.

But he had much more to say. He wanted her to go with him the next Saturday evening to choose some of

the principal articles for their house; and when that was settled, he wanted to persuade her to buy some wedding clothes for herself; but he felt delicate about suggesting this.

"I told you one day," he began, "that a man always saved up a little money for pleasure and that sort of thing at the time of his wedding."

"Yes," she said, sad ideas floating over her that a man who would be willing to be married without religion might wish to have a drinking-party or a rowdy dance to celebrate the day.

"Well," he said awkwardly, "would you mind going and getting some new clothes, and letting me pay the bill?" Then he went on in haste to cover up this idea with others, so that it might seem less offensive to her. "I don't think there's much use in going to cheap shops, you know; a few things that are good are better than a lot that are cheap. You would like them better."

Star was looking grave. "For my own pleasure, I would rather not have any new clothes, as mother cannot buy them for me, but I see that it would be pleasanter for you; it would look more respectable to your friends."

"It *would* look more respectable," he said, not intending to be rude in any way, but only to encourage her to take his money.

Her lips tightened. "What sort of things would you like me to get?"

She began to feel the yoke under which, for the sake of others, she had put her girlish neck. She did not shrink from it; it was rather a comfort to her to feel it settle painfully, it helped to calm the perturbation of

her mind ; but his next words were so easily kind that the pressure eased for the moment.

“I don’t want you to stop wearing black for your father, if you had rather not; you will always look prettiest in what you like best to wear. I meant to give you twelve pounds a year to dress on, and this year I should like to add another twelve pounds to it, and I thought if you spent that extra sum before we were married it would be better. It isn’t much, I know.”

“It is more than enough. I am rather clever at sewing. I will dress as well as I can, for your sake.”

“Now, dear girl,” he began brusquely, “don’t let us have the goody-goody of self-denial and doing things for other people’s sake. If we both do what seems natural and pleasant, we shall get on much better. You like new clothes, like every one else; you can wear them because you like them.” Then he perceived that she was not accustomed to be spoken to in that way, and abated his tone. “I believe that what people do is always done because, under the circumstances, that is what they like best to do. It seems to me better to recognize that as we go along. It is natural, now, that you should want to please me a little, just as I want to please you; but I don’t try to please you for your sake, but for my own.”

Star made no answer.

“I have read a little philosophy, and that is the gist of my philosophy,” he explained.

“I don’t know anything about philosophy,” she said.

“Well, don’t be angry because I speak plainly.”

She gathered from what he said, not any idea of his theory of motive in general, but that he did not want

her to have an oppressive feeling of duty towards him; and she felt that, if he spoke more roughly than she had expected, he was more generous than she had expected too. The young summer lay about her, and Hubert had said again that she was pretty. After all, even though there was some discrepancy between his words and manner and her own, it was still a pleasanter prospect to have ten or twelve pounds at once to spend on new clothes than to work all the week to earn fifteen shillings. She had a very natural heart, and it grew more cheerful as they talked on.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHEN they got home that afternoon, Hubert stayed to tea with them. They took tea picnic fashion, round the fire, where the kettle boiled. He talked chiefly with Richarda. The conversation flagged sometimes from restraint, and she, eager to be sociable, spoke of the burglary. That, she thought, must be in a newspaper man's line.

“Do you think it will be found out?” she asked.

“No,” he said, “I think not; there is no clue.”

He leant forward as he spoke, one arm on his knee, and looked thoughtfully into the fire. His attitude was not such as a polished man would have assumed among ladies, but then he could not know that. He seemed intensely meditative, as if considering all possible ways by which the burglar might be traced. The light of the May evening had not waned, but in the low room it was

dim, and the dimness was a screen for the negligence of his behaviour, so that he seemed less boorish than interesting, and his face had a curious beauty upon it as it dropped into serious thought.

“What do you think about it?” pursued Richarda.

“That the person who did it was a genius.”

“Ah, you only mean he was uncommonly sharp. We are taught nowadays to look upon genius as something more than cleverness—a sort of enlargement of mind which only two or three men in a generation can possess.”

“Yes, that is what I mean. I think when a man has genius for anything, he has an inclination to do that thing so strong that neither he nor any one else can resist it. He must do it or die. The things that are done that way are done by a master hand.”

“Yes,” said she, reflectively assenting, “but, in that case, it has nothing to do with stealing.”

“Why not? Stradivarius”—his education was evidently self-made; he did not pronounce the name rightly—“had genius for making fiddles. Another man may have a genius for breaking into houses.”

Richarda loved to have a new idea to play with. She instantly fondled this one. She drew a long breath of pleased interest, during which many new combinations of thought seemed to dance past and elude her grasp; then she settled back to the immediate subject.

“You think that in thieving there may be talent and genius. Some will bungle at it; many will do it cleverly; but, here and there, there is a genius at work—a king among thieves. Then what makes you think you trace his footsteps here?”

He had lifted his head while she spoke with a gesture which gave Star, as she sat half inattentively watching him, the curious impression that a man triumphant in some struggle, and receiving adulation, would have roused himself from reverie in the same way.

“First, because no one *can* trace his footsteps,” he replied. “Secondly, because he took the money from under the nose of four strong men and a watch-dog. Thirdly, because——”

“What thirdly?” asked Richarda.

“I was only going to say that if the dog was used as a blind—a sort of counter-irritant for the energies of the men in the house—it was a bold and original design; but we have not a shadow of proof for that.”

“He has thought it all out,” thought Star. “He is very clever at writing up such things, and if he knows it and is proud, it is only natural.”

But Hubert seemed to have said all that it interested him to say about his theory of the theft. Richarda talked on about it, telling how Star had seen the dog and the half-witted lamplighter, and he answered her, telling them some tales of this lamplighter, who was, in his way, a public character about the town. Hubert explained that he knew all about him because they two were old chums, and that he had worked up the burglary and the items of interest connected with it for his paper. He knew, he said, all that was to be known, and he seemed to tell them all he knew. His own first interest appeared to have relapsed into professional indifference to facts which he had “already converted into bread and butter,” as he said.

“How curious to make one’s bread and butter out of

crimes!" said Richarda, her mind, as usual, flitting with ease on the track of a fresh suggestion.

"It does not need a genius to do that," he answered.

"Do you always report the crimes?"

"That is my department. I am rather a dab at it."

"It seems terrible," said the mother, "that any one should make profit out of crime." She did not like the craft; her dislike was in her tone.

"But, mammy," Star joined in hastily, "policemen, lawyers, judges—they all live by it."

"Newspapers are splendid public servants," said Hubert good-naturedly. "I heard a curious idea once about them in connection with the millennium."

"What was it?" asked Star, because no one else did. She felt uncomfortable to notice that he used the word "millennium" exactly like an ordinary word. To her mind, there should have been a little reverential modulation of the voice upon it. What would her mother think?

"A preacher was speaking about the text which says the coming of the Son of Man shall be as the lightning flashing from one end of heaven to the other."

Again Star would fain have stopped him. There was something terribly bald to her ear, sensitive for her mother's approval, in the way he spoke the sacred Name.

"He said there were two sorts of light—physical light and knowledge. Crime of all sorts throve where there was a lack of either kind. In old times the rich man could perpetrate all sorts of tyranny in his secret chambers and dungeons—no one knew. And the poor, huddled together in squalid streets and houses, robbed

their neighbours, and beat their children and wives to death, and no one knew; there was little said about it, and no record made. His idea was that in this century the electric telegraph and the electric light were ordained by Providence to cast such glare of light upon all crime that it would diminish and cease. The electric light is still very much a thing of the future, although, I must say, it would be difficult to do much that was unlawful if there were no darkness in towns; but about the light that the telegraph throws on crime, I can speak positively. Why, a horse can't be very badly treated, a child can't be brutally whipped, but the public opinion of the whole civilized world is focussed upon the case within twenty-four hours. And that is through the agency of newspapers. People cry out about the quantity of crime! If there were a tenth part as much as there used to be, the papers would not be big enough to hold the reports; what is more—they would not report it, for they can only afford to print what is interesting. The fact that brutality interests the majority shows that it is comparatively a novelty to them, and that it rouses their indignation shows that it must continue to diminish. The telegraph also brings nations nearer together, creates sympathy between them; it is making one mind and one heart of the whole world by spreading the same knowledge everywhere. It is an immense factor in the education of the race."

"What has that to do with the text?" Star spoke in a discouraging tone. She began to perceive that Hubert and her mother could not discuss serious subjects without friction, expressed or felt.

"Don't you catch the idea? Lightning is electricity.

I believe the text represents Jesus Christ coming as lightning to put a quick end to days of tyranny and war. I suppose the clergyman thought the physical forces were used by God just as the body is used by the soul. Well, here you have electricity inducing morality; why should it not be the body of God for the time being, as much as flesh and blood could be?"

"I don't understand," said Star. She was not trying to understand. The attention of both girls was absorbed by the fear that their mother would assume the tone of reproving argument—an argument for which she had no strength, nervous or mental, of the sort to match Hubert's. That such an argument would be the natural outcome of their mother's notions of duty they knew. They did not know—who does?—the strength of that wisdom that lies below and above the mere conscious thought of the Heaven-taught mind. Perhaps Mrs. Thompson herself felt that she would have acted a nobler part if she had reproved the young man for words that to her, in her ignorance of the reconciliations of modern thought, seemed profane. Her mind was filled with sadness that the circumstances were such that reproof did not come to her lips. She let the idea he had given out drop in the silence of that quiet Sunday hour, only saying in gentle comment—

"You said there were two kinds of light which opposed wickedness—the light we see with our eyes and the knowledge that enlightens our minds. Did not the preacher speak of a third—the Holy Spirit who instructs our spirits?"

"No," said Hubert frankly, "I don't remember that he did."

“It is the most important.” She spoke with gentle authority, and said no more.

After a while the young man rose to go. He had no thought that he had given pain, and he was content with himself—perhaps a trifle wistful—why, he did not know. He said good-bye to the mother and sister soberly. He took Star with him outside the door. They stood again in that same mean entry where, so short a time ago, she had almost fainted in assenting to the marriage which was now close upon them, where, not many days before, she had stood to watch him as he trudged through the rain after their first meeting. No gas was lit on the stair now. The calm, shadowless light of evening came in with mild air at the street-door. At the foot of the dirty stair he stood a few steps from her, and she looked up to see what he had brought her out to say. No one happened to come up or down the stair. Hubert waited a moment to listen for steps.

“Star, don’t you think we had better kiss each other?”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, and drew back.

He looked at her a minute, and perceiving—it seemed rather by common sense than gallantry—that she would make no advance, he came up to her with kind intent.

“Oh, wait a minute,” she gasped, putting out both hands as a shield. “Give me a minute—I can’t yet.”

She seemed summoning her forces to sustain some shock, and he waited, not so much hurt as if he had been more versed in the way of women and kisses.

“You needn’t if you don’t like,” he went on, with an awful deliberateness, as if a kiss might be a matter of

time and space. "But I thought it might be better, you know."

"Yes," said Star, impatiently stopping his words with a gesture of repulse.

"Oh, well," he said, more hurt now, "you needn't if you would rather not; only I never kissed any one, and if I don't begin to learn——"

"Never kissed any one!" There was the utmost wonder in her tone, rather that he should tell such a barefaced falsehood than at the possibility that his words were true.

But they were true, and in a minute she comprehended that.

"The matron in the Orphanage, when I was a little chap, used to kiss some of the boys. I don't remember that she ever kissed me—I was not that sort—and there was no one else to do it. I never got on kissing terms with any girl. I suppose you would not want that I should have?" This last with a slight defiance thrown at her reluctance and incredulity.

And Star, who had been fed on kisses all her life, who could not imagine life without them, felt suddenly such a rush of pity for this young man who had befriended her, that she slipped her arms round his neck without more ado, and kissed him tenderly.

He certainly did need, as he had suggested, "to learn," for he took the unexpected embrace without much apparent graciousness. But Star noticed nothing. She was overwhelmed by the thought of his former loneliness and her present temerity.

Another moment of mutual awkwardness and they parted.

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

STAR had no servant in her new home. Hubert had thought they could afford a cheap one, but on this point Star was determined. Her American life had taught her every kind of house-work. She longed to be doing, and prove that her boast was true that she could repay all he did for her by the thrift and charm of her management. This fact—that they had no servant—made it impossible that they should have an outing on their wedding-day. After going to church on that eventful Wednesday, they took Mrs. Thompson and Richarda to the new house, and then all Star's energies were required to sooth away their fatigue, to guard them from all possible danger of cold, and surround them with the comfort and brightness needful to calm their fluttered spirits. Hubert, like a wise man, interested himself for the rest of the day in doing some deft handiwork about the house and garden, whistling as he worked alone with philosophic calm. He was clever with his hands, and liked manual work. The tiny place was like a new toy both to him and Star, and, by the time three days had fled, they seemed to have become a part of it and it a part of them, so much of mind and heart they had put into its fittings.

They were so busy that they had very little time to

talk to one another. When Hubert passed his mother-in-law's door morning and evening, he would take occasion to heap up her fire, in spite of the May sun. When he went and came, he would say to Star, "Are they comfortable?" "Have they got all they want?"—"they" always meaning the invalids. By the third afternoon, Hubert and Star could go for a half-day into the country without fear for those at home.

"Mother says I *must* go," said Star, when Hubert made the proposal.

"How could she, when I never spoke of it till this moment?" It was Saturday, and he had a half-holiday.

"I mean," said Star, looking the other way, "she said if you wanted me to go anywhere, I must go."

"Oh! Well—come along then."

They went half an hour's journey by train to the village of Croom, which lay on the other side of the hill that stood near the town. An old castle stood on the slope above Croom, but they had not come solely to see the castle, for Hubert had an expert way of combining business with anything he did. On the other side of the village there was a factory where toys were made, and he took Star to see this first, making notes of all that he saw, for an article he must write. Work was not going on vigorously because of the half-holiday, but an energetic foreman, glad to have his place advertised, showed them everything with eager politeness. The toys were ingenious; there were dolls that talked, dolls that walked, animals of all sorts that made such unearthly noises that any proper-minded child would have been afraid of them; there were baby dolls also, who

winked in a ghastly way, and cried in a rather natural manner.

“These imitate the real sound the best,” said Star to the foreman, when they came to these waxen infants. She was much interested to have their internal organs taken out and explained to her. She was interested and tired at the same time—tired of going up and down stairs, and through long work-rooms, and smelling the oil of the machines. Hubert seemed neither interested nor tired; to him it was all in the day’s work.

“When you have lived a while with me,” he said to Star, “you will have seen the inside of all sorts of places. It is a large part of my business to get at the insides of things—talking-dolls, factories of all sorts, men’s minds—and sketch what I see there for the public benefit.”

This was while they were mounting the rising ground to the castle, and Star began to feel a new sense of comradeship with him.

She was too shy to own her fatigue, but when they had taken the conventional round of the ruin and come out again on the fields that formed the slope of ground between it and the village, she sat down to enjoy the scene and let him go on alone to search among the cottages for one in which they could have tea.

Was she happy as she sat there?

She began to drink in the beauty of the place as she had not done while hurrying along in her effort to keep pace with her light-footed husband. She touched with her bare hand the warm grass on which she sat. How different it was from American sod! This was half composed of moss and tiny flower-roots. Two daisies and a violet blossomed under the space that her small

hand covered, hardly lifting themselves above the surface of the warm, dry moss. Her eyes swept the lovely spring landscape with a sense of comfort and delight. Her pasture-field, open to the sky, swept treeless half-way down to the village, and met a tangle of green-hedged lanes and hedgerow elms not yet very green, that edged about some straggling houses whose gardens sloped to the street of red-tiled cottages. She could see the stony pavement of this principal street leading to the church, whose gray Norman tower stood up in the sunshine. On the top of the tower St. Peter's cock swung on a vane right against the fleecy gray of the sky. No—was it gray? was it blue? How different from the skies at home! The sun was hot; the sky was clear; yet there, where the horizon lay beyond the vane of the tower, she did not, at the first glance, see if it were sky or cloud. She looked again, trying to penetrate with strong glance into the softness of lighted atmosphere, and she saw it was cloud, but so light, so far, it suggested sunshine more than rain. There was layer upon layer of it—gray film, across which a procession of dun-coloured cloud-pieces came floating—shark-shaped, whale-shaped, pretty, graceful things. They moved slowly, one before the other; and, nearer, there were white streaks hanging. All the hues melted together in the warm-tinted air. When Star ceased to knit her brows and look with effort, she saw only what might be changeful light in brown sea-shell transferred to the air above the furthest blue rim of the land. She looked up the hill on whose gentle slope she was sitting, and below its top she saw the ivied battlements of the castle against the misty violet of the central sky. The sun poured down with

such brightness that the little holes round the top of the castle wall, which Hubert had said were used for pouring boiling lead upon assaulting armies, were black with sharp shadow. Just below them, in the corner nearest her, there was a window in the form of a slender cross that was very dark in the sunny wall. The green ivy, too, in which the starlings flitted and chatted, had its black nooks of shadow, and every projecting bit of turret and roof and gateway was thrown out bright against the dark shadow it cast. Trees stood about the castle at the top of her field—ash and oak, still gray as winter, and the branching, bushy elms hardly yet seemed to have leaves, but looked as if they stood in a shower of falling flakes of emerald light. Star looked upward, downward, and felt satisfied.

Her fitful attention was soon turned to considering the points of the compass. Where was the town from which she had come? In what direction lay her home? Home! A month ago she would have looked at these English fields and skies without a thought of possession in them. Now it was very different; all she saw was hers in a sense, for it lay in the vicinity of a place which claimed her as its own, which she had reason to suppose would always claim her.

She was not given to musing in methodical and conscious fashion, but, impelled by this last idea, she began to search with her eyes the paths and lanes that led from the village, to see if Hubert was coming back to her. Was she glad that he would soon be back to take her home with him? She hardly asked herself the question, but it floated in her mind, and as soon as she descried him coming, she dropped her eyes upon

her wedding-ring, and, twisting it about on her finger smiled a little to herself. Yes, she was glad; she liked Hubert. She was a little afraid of him, far too shy yet to speak to him when it was not necessary, or even to look at him; yet she liked to be near him. The cottage he had taken her to had not been the sylvan retreat she had expected; but already Star liked the one small house of the humble brick row which had fallen to her share better than any other house that could have been built. She knew, as an admitted fact, that a man who was richer and more polished in habit and manner would have made her a better husband, according to an ideal scale of better and worse; but then, he would not be Hubert, and, of real men, Star had begun to like Hubert as she could not conceive of liking any other. She watched him coming on an open path near the village, lost him between the close hedges of a lane, and saw him emerge on the footpath across her own field, with great complacency; but when he struck out from the path to cross the grass to where she sat, her complacency vanished, she drew her glove over her ring, and began to look awkward and feel shy.

Hubert stumbled in climbing the little knoll where she sat, and, like a practical fellow, utilized the impetus to throw himself on the grass at her feet.

“Well,” he began, “I found a clean place where they will make us tea for sevenpence apiece—fresh eggs and watercresses. It is to be ready in half an hour.”

“Shall we go then?” she asked.

“No. Why should we? It won’t take you five minutes to walk down.”

So she sat still and he fidgeted until he was com-

fortable on the grassy bank, one elbow on the ground and his head upon his hand.

The place was quiet, but occasionally some one passed on the path through their field. A soldier and a girl came by. They were walking in close colloquy, he embracing her waist, and she leaning upon him, vulgarly negligent of all the world but themselves. Hubert watched them till the soldier's bright red coat disappeared in the lane below.

"That is not our way," he remarked.

"I certainly hope not," responded Star with asperity.

He gave a little laugh, and, putting out his hand, clasped it over the instep of her foot with a doubtful caress. Her foot was the only part of her near enough for him to touch, and he seemed to expect her to draw it away. She did not. He had a right to hold her foot in his hand if he chose, she said to herself.

"Star, are you happy?"

He usually made a pronoun serve for her name, so she felt that this was a particular occasion.

"To have an egg and cress for tea?" she asked.

"No; you know what I mean. Newly married people are supposed to be very happy. Are you?"

"I will tell you the truth," she said in a low voice. She flushed and her voice trembled. "I should be happy, quite happy, if"—he waited—"if I could be sure that I had done *right* to answer that"—a lower whisper—"that advertisement."

He had listened, catching her words evidently with intense interest, but he did not seem to understand.

"How right?" he asked. "The proof of the pudding is in the eating."

“I did not see that it was exactly wrong at the time,” she argued, “and I don’t see it now ; but, when I did it, I didn’t think it was right ; I thought I couldn’t help it.”

“According to the books of morals, if you thought it wasn’t right, it wasn’t right to you ; but what has that to do with your being happy now ?”

“If the beginning of it all was wrong, how could I expect happiness ?” After a moment she added, more insistently, “I could not be happy if I knew I had got all we have now by doing wrong, you know.”

“I don’t know—at least, not by experience—but I suppose I know what you mean. I knew a woman once who had seen the moon over her left shoulder the night before her son was born, and she never had any real comfort in him, for she knew he would be unlucky. It was impossible to shake her belief in the bad omen.”

“That is not the same thing. That was a silly superstition.”

“It seems to me yours is very like it. What has the right and wrong of what you did a month ago to do with your circumstances to-day ? They are what they are, and what you did then cannot make them more or less satisfactory, unless it does so by preying upon your mind as the moon preyed on that woman’s mind. Look at that castle,” he went on ; “think how many generations of men have fought over its old walls. Some of them died in secure possession, leaving their families well provided for ; others died wounded outside its walls or in its dungeons, leaving their families to hunger and shame. I think the men who did well did right ; those who did poorly did wrong. The only right nature

recognizes is the course of action which survives and triumphs."

Star looked at him as a bird looks who is thinking of ruffling up its feathers and making a stand to its opponent, but is not quite decided.

Hubert turned his glance to her, and there was a sweeter look on his face than she had yet seen. She felt his hand strong, warm, and tender, round the instep of her foot.

"It makes *me* happy," he said, "that you should admit that you would be happy if you had done right. I feel quite easy about the rightness. I am sure you have never done wrong."

Star sat still on the seat of rock she had found, and looked off at the view.

"There is not room for me on the top of your stone," he urged; "come down beside me."

She moved, undecidedly at first, but in a minute she came down to his level.

He sat up and put his arm round her waist.

"That is nicer," he said. "Isn't it nicer, my dear?"

Star smiled a little.

He looked all round. "No one is looking," he said, and he kissed her.

A little while after they went down to tea right blithely.

CHAPTER II.

MARIAN had not been many days in her uncle's new house before the eyes of her benevolence were turned to the row of cottages nearest to their own gates. She had been obliged to give up the district she had had during her winter in town, and the humble houses of this new neighbourhood seemed a natural substitute. She set apart one afternoon in the week on which she intended to call upon each family in turn in a methodical and orthodox manner, but before the first time came she was deterred from her purpose by nothing less trifling than a hint from her uncle's servant, Gilchrist, to do precisely the thing she had herself planned, or, at least, it seemed to her that his suggestion pointed in precisely the direction of her own intention, and no sooner had he spoken than it seemed wiser to her to wait for direction from the parish clergyman before choosing her field of charitable enterprise. It struck her as a suspicious circumstance that this man should be anxious to get her out of the house on the plea of visiting the poor. Perhaps it would be wiser never to be out at stated times, so that he might not depend on her absence. Her suspicion of him was large and vague; it embraced almost every possibility of evil, but none definitely.

Marian was very unhappy in those days. In her old life of school-work, if she had not experienced great pleasures, she had not noticed their lack, for she had

had constant occupation, constant and varied companionship. In the first winter she had passed with her uncle she had expended as much energy as she possessed in becoming attached to organized forms of work in the centre of the town. Now, once more, she found herself uprooted, and she felt indeed like a plant whose roots are left to wither without kindly covering of soil, for she was lonesome in the large, isolated house, to which they had come. She had not now even the consolation of feeling herself to be useful, for her uncle had bidden his old friends to come and admire his new possession, and, as there was usually one or other of them available, her services as companion were dispensed with.

In this mood of unfeigned and self-acknowledged discontent, Marian walked much in the pleasure-grounds, which, if not very extensive, were ample enough for solitary rambles. These grounds had been left so long locked up and untended that Nature had run wild in them in her own beautiful way, and May came now to keep festival there with her train of blossoms. The great beauty touched Marian's heart with an aching longing for some one to enjoy it with her.

Thus one day she rested on a bench that stood fronting a copse which hid it from the high-road, or at least almost hid it, and would do so quite when the leaves came. At present passers on the road might look in, and the copse, composed chiefly of young beech and alder, showed nothing but a haze of gray and reddish twigs. Wonderfully soft was the form and colour of the million young twigs interlacing, through each of which the sap of spring was coursing, giving warmth to its separate hue, and, massed together, they

looked like the beautiful mist which, in old tales, gathers before the Spirit of the place appears. Here a tint of palest, faintest green where some buds were swelling, here the rose pink of young limes, mingled with the prevailing red of beech buds, the brown of alder, and the branching gray stems of all. Blended like the hues of a rainbow, more sombre, less orderly, as a rainbow born of earth, not heaven, the hues of this copse stood back as groundwork for the more forward painting of Spring. In an open bit of turf between Marian and the young trees wild hyacinths were in flower, like a blue flame creeping in the long grass, and nearer her seat a huge wych elm stood hanging out mossy tufts on every twig with quaint and magnificent grace. It was this tree which had attracted her to the seat. Only after she had admired it long did she notice the colour of the copse, for the elm stood out against it as lace would show on velvet, as an illuminated palace would show against the neutral tint of evening. Marian's soul became absorbed in the tree. Its winged seeds adorned all its hanging branches and seemed to have imprisoned the sunshine in their golden green. There was no sun and shadow that day; there was enough dampness on leaf and branch to enrich the colour. The great tree's bole and trunk were dressed in ivy; its branches were gnarled and rough, and its twigs clothed it all over as only elm twigs can; they stood out from its trunk; they waved and drooped from its giant arms, and everywhere they were covered with their tufted seeds of half golden green. Behind her the sycamores had quite big leaves, and the horse-chestnut had already opened its fans of generous green; but

Marian was in love with her elm seeds and her copse. She had found in them a sudden accession of wealth, but wealth which, like the gold her uncle gave her, she did not know how to enjoy alone

Opportunity is God's handmaiden.

Marian looked up and saw a pretty and prettily dressed young woman coming towards her from the gate on the high-road, smiling a little as she came, as if to forestall any lack of welcome which might await her.

"I know," the intruder said, "I ought not to have come in, but I have passed on the road twice, and it looked so very beautiful that when I saw you through the trees, I thought I might ask if you would let me walk round."

There was a distinctly strange accent, which went far to excuse the idiom and the intrusion, but, as the accent was not that of the Eastern States, Marian did not at once recognize it as American. She looked, and wondered, as she rose, instinctively but with reserve, to do the honours of her wild flowers. She walked a step or two in a stately way to show the path, and soon found herself taking keen delight in directing her visitor's enchanted eyes to nooks and vistas in the blossoming shrubbery. Why should she not thus please herself when it was also kindness to a stranger?

"You are not English," she said, with gentle interrogation.

"No, I am American; but mother was brought up near here. That was partly why we came; but all her friends are dead or gone."

"Have you walked out from town?"

"We live quite near you, in the first row of cottages;

but I dare say you have never noticed them, they are so small."

And here Marian was left to her unaided wondering for the time, for Star could only exclaim in ecstasy at drifts of white pear and cherry bloom.

The hostess soon betrayed the turn of her thoughts. After a few preliminary remarks, she ventured to ask, with hesitation—

"Is your husband a socialist or a reformer? Does he think living among poor people the way to raise them?"

"No, he is a newspaper reporter."

"Oh!"—a moment's hesitation—"But I thought he might have those ideas; they are getting fashionable now."

"No,"—with sweet indifference—"we live there because we are poor. Mother's money was lost in a bank, last summer. It was very sad for us, but now that I am married, my husband takes care of us all, so we do not mind so much."

"It was very sad to lose the money," said Marian sympathetically.

She was no snob at heart, but her ideas were conventional. She was, in truth, unconsciously considering whether she might follow the inclination she felt to make friends with this lady on the strength of the money that had been possessed, or whether her attitude towards her ought to be that best described by the verb, "to district." It was with a sort of medley of the two that she went on asking questions which the other, in her ignorance of the world, did not perceive to be patronizing. Star told the story of death and illness, travel and poverty, very simply but without reluctance; and,

when she had finished, the choice between patronage and friendship, which Marian had been considering, was scarcely hers any longer. Her heart went out to the impulsive girl at her side as to something fairer and nobler than herself, as it had gone out to the beauty of the spring. Beauty, like a broken Venus, has no arms in which to take our offerings, while Love has eager hands. It was not only because Star was more fascinating than the wych elm that Marian's action in admiring and liking her was more irrevocable. There was subtle response, a taking of what was given, a giving something in return, a psychical transaction that passed without their observation as they talked on in gentle, womanly fashion.

The elm tree was more beautiful when they came back to the seat beside it, but in the mean time they had only talked of common things, and Marian could not but smile at the calm content with which Star brought her story of trouble to its conclusion, ending where she had begun—"Yes, it was very bad to be poor, because we were not accustomed to it; but now I am married, we are very happy."

"It sounds like a fairy-tale—the prince arriving just at the right time."

In response to this there came a shadow in the young wife's eyes; but no word was said; the shadow was unseen.

To Marian it was all fairy tale, for Star slipped easily from great events to small, and, in discussing the neighbourhood which was new to them both, it came out that Star viewed it chiefly as a good place to do one's own housework in. She told with pretty earnestness how fortunate it was that the town water-cart came out

twice a week over the road, for she had less dusting to do in consequence, and how the butcher and the greengrocer were not too far away for her to walk to their shops between the time that she made the beds and the time that she must set about preparing the early dinner. From that she fell to telling how well her kitchen stove worked now that Hubert had cleverly altered one of the dampers, and how good the recipes were in a certain cookery book.

"I feel sorry now," said she, "for any one who hasn't the work of a house to do. It is so interesting to see how a cake bakes or how a fire burns up. I never get tired of managing fires; it is like having a living thing to play with—and then, fires are so pretty."

"But"—with diffidence—"isn't it hard on your hands?"

"It is only stupid servants who put their hands into things. I am very clever. I manage the fires with the tongs. Some people wear gloves, but I think that's very clumsy. But Hubert says Englishwomen are very seldom taught to do everything in a house. You see, in California servants very often left at a day's notice, and of course we had to learn to do everything."

"I think it is wonderfully clever of you"—Marian spoke with still a lingering tinge of patronage—"I don't see how you get time to go out." She gave an admiring look at Star's pretty clothes.

"That is because you are accustomed to servants, and don't consider that they make almost as much work as the people they work for. Servants have to make their own beds, get ready, eat, and clear away their own meals, wash their own clothes, wipe up all they spill, dust off

the dust they make in their clumsy way of doing things—all that besides working for you. Naturally they have not much time to spare. Then one can plan so as to save one's self a world of trouble in a way that they cannot. By two o'clock I am generally ready to put on a nice frock, and I have nothing more to do till my husband comes in to tea."

Marian was greatly interested. "May I come and see your house?" she asked.

Star gave the required invitation, and rose to go. "But first I must tell you what I really came to say. I was too shy to say it at first. Mrs. Couples asked me to tell you that Mr. Tod is ill."

"Mr. Tod!" gasped Marian faintly. A ghost could not have startled her more than the words.

"Oh, I am sorry. I did not know it mattered to you, or I would not have told you so abruptly."

"It doesn't matter to me," exclaimed Marian inhumanly; "but I did not know that you knew——" She was going to say, "Mrs. Couples," or "Mr. Tod," but she stopped feebly at the word "knew," full of astonishment that this young matron, whom she had never seen before, should know anything connected with that uncomfortable incident.

"Mrs. Couples didn't know whether you would care or not, and neither did I, of course; but it seems so sad for the young fellow to be ill, and no one in the world to care for him, that when my husband told Mrs. Couples that you lived here, she came up to see if I would tell you." After a moment, "My husband lived with Mrs. Couples. He saw you, you know, the evening you went to see Mr. Tod."

And now Star said again that she must go, and, taking leave, she tripped away as lightly, as happily, as she came.

Poor Marian! The name of Tod resolved itself into a bugbear to her shrinking feelings. She watched her guest depart, wishing that she had had the good sense to explain her connection with Tod, or, rather, that she had no connection with him.

She had set the man and the incident wholly aside, but now that his name was cast at her again, his relation to her assumed a different aspect. Illness might be no more painful to Tod than his former disconsolate yearning after an unknown sympathy, but the conventional mind cannot slight physical suffering with the easy contempt which it throws upon romantic vagaries. Illness is pain, and the human heart, when not entirely selfish, must wish to relieve it. And it appeared to Marian that, in this case, some one expected something—unjustly, certainly—nothing could be more unjust than to imagine that Tod had any claim on her! She repeated that to herself at intervals with some indignation. Nothing could be more annoying to her than to find that her visit to Tod had been marked, and she herself traced, not by one, but by several people. And, moreover, it seemed especially hard that, just when she had taken a fancy to cultivate the acquaintance of a charming stranger, who had presumably dropped from the clouds of distance and disconnection, the shadow of this silly travelling clerk should fall between them.

CHAPTER III.

MARIAN argued a good deal in her own mind against her liking for her new acquaintance. She tried to tell herself that the American had shown an unreserve which was undignified, and a pitiful ignorance of propriety; on the other hand, she was evidently refined and educated to a certain degree, apparently true and good. This was the analysis, but it omitted that personality which is the sum of every one's qualities, and which repels or attracts other personalities, why or how we cannot tell. Such attraction begins as invisible seed, which waits for circumstances to nourish it.

It seemed, however, quite clear to Marian that, having formerly thought of visiting these cottages without knowledge of their inmates, it was the more incumbent to go now to one of them to inquire after the two invalids of whom she had heard, and she determined to go soon, that she might repair her foolish mistake in not having answered the message about Tod more incisively.

So it happened that Miss Gower, after walking from her uncle's gate, stood on Hubert Kent's doorstep, and knocked.

There was a feeble step, a feeble hand on the door, and, when it was open, Marian stood before an elderly woman, whose delicate shoulders drooped under an old shawl, whose hand, transparently white, seemed scarce strong enough to hold the door, and whose face was

filled with both suffering and cheerful patience. Marian felt that the glance of the faded eyes, as it fell upon her, was a benediction, yet their owner was thinking of nothing but the business on hand.

“My daughter is not in, but I think she will be here very soon; will you come in and wait for her?”

Marian was taken into the small front room. She rose again from the largest chair which at first she had taken.

“Won’t you sit here instead?” she begged.

Her voice and manner were full of impetuous solicitude, but the elder lady had a quiet bearing which stilled the overflow of zeal on her behalf. She answered inquiries about her health gently. She was better, she said. The doctor considered her much better since they had left the town. Then she went on to say, brightly, that the spring was backward, that she and her daughters noticed its slow progress especially, because the American spring always progressed much faster. She gave one or two interesting details about her western home, speaking of its scenery and seasons with a quiet, deep affection, implied in the interest with which she described it, not expressed otherwise. Did she realize that she could never see the beloved place again with earthly eyes? Marian wondered, longed to suggest her sympathy, longed to know more of the tale the suffering face told, to know much more of the joy and cheer that was there.

“I see several more of these cottages are taken already. Don’t you dread having them filled up? The children will make a great noise.”

A very bright smile came in answer.

“Noise does not trouble me as it does some people.”

“You like children?”

“There is very often something that can be done for a child, and kindness to a child often opens the way to the mother’s heart. The people who will live about here will not be above needing occasional help.”

Marian spoke with hesitation, making earnest answer to the feeling she perceived beneath the words.

“Do you really feel anticipation of pleasure in helping your neighbours? Is it *pleasure* to you to help people? It is not to me.”

The lady addressed had no answer to give. She had not been in the habit of asking herself what was pleasure and what not. Hers was a mind that dealt only with circumstances as they arose—with the exception, indeed, of some moral and theological theories. Had she been asked if she thought it right to help people, she would have had an answer; but whether it gave her pleasure—the last thing she was likely to discover was the great strength and beauty of her own heart. She looked at Marian bending forward, intense in her questioning, as a soul desiring heaven must be when it recognizes a priest of God, and evaded the question, hardly comprehending it.

“Sometimes when poor people are in trouble, a little advice and encouragement goes a long way. I do not know that I should have chosen this locality for my daughter, but it certainly will have its privileges as well as drawbacks.”

“And you—you will like to go out and in among these people like a sister of mercy? I can understand any one doing that from a sense of duty, becoming

interested and not disliking it, but I cannot fancy looking upon it as a pleasure, something to be looked forward to, like meeting a friend, for instance. Do you look on it that way? That seems to me the highest."

Again the point was passed over.

"I shall not go among our neighbours much, perhaps. I may not be here very long; but I am sure my daughter will make friends with them."

The words, "I may not be here very long," spoken with cheerful, matter-of-fact accent, conveyed to Marian their precise meaning, that she thought of death as the only exit from that place—that she expected to find it soon. So Marian got no answer to her question in words; none the less did she know that its answer, and the answer to the far deeper one, "How may I, too, find this joy?" were to be found in this woman's inmost life, if she could but find them. She ceased her questions, and soon began instead to tell her own troubles in an idle way, drawn on by the magic of motherly sympathy.

"No, I do not like our new house very much. I like it for some things. I like the grounds, and I was glad to leave the house on the parade; but—oh, I know you will laugh at me—the fact is, I dislike the reputation it has of being haunted. I think it was dishonest to sell it to uncle without letting us know."

"If," began Mrs. Thompson, "it could be regarded as a defect."

"I know you will say that a ghost is nothing, and I quite agree with you in theory, but I would rather not be much alone in a house that is said to be haunted. I think it is a defect."

Here came Star. The click of her latchkey, the

trip of her feet, brought gaiety. Before they saw her her sweet voice was calling, "Where are you, mother mine? Where are you, sweetest of mothers?" As she reached the room she became sedate.

What had been said to the mother must be repeated to the daughter. Star had no sooner caught an idea of what they were saying than she became perfectly interested. Marian was confessing her nervous tremors to them as she had never confessed them to herself.

"It is so romantic," urged Star, her healthy nerves and practical mind inclining her to jeer at the tale.

"If the tradition were of a lady in white I should admit that it was picturesque, or a man in chains, or even a skeleton; but a baby that is not seen, but only heard to cry, that is neither romantic nor picturesque—it is horrible."

"But it is a mere idle servant's tale!"

"I believe it is true that in the time of the last occupant a poor baby whom no one wanted was left at the door in the night. The people who left it intended to leave it at the Orphanage further up the road. However, the master of the house would not have it taken in or touched; it was left there till morning, and then it was dead."

"What a shame!" cried Star naturally.

Marian went on wistfully; her overcharged mind relieved itself in unintended confidence. If to be suddenly, unpremeditatedly confidential to newly made friends outside our own circle of life on matters which are carefully concealed from those whom we meet daily is an extraordinary thing, then Marian was doing that which was extraordinary.

“Yes, it was a shameful thing; but I suppose there were reasons against taking in the child which he allowed to weigh with him. My uncle’s servant said a curious thing. He is a very peculiar man. I am almost afraid of him.”

“What did he say?”

“I was obliged to speak to him on the subject, for, although he came first only as a nurse and personal servant, since we came out here uncle has given a good deal of the charge of the place into his hands. So when I was afraid that the tale would frighten the maids I had to speak to him. I made sure that he would express indignation at leaving a child in the cold like that, for he is, or else pretends to be, excessively kind; but, though he took occasion to give his opinion, he said that most people would have done the same thing under slightly different circumstances. He spoke of the ghostly cry, too, as if it really existed, and when I taxed him with believing such a foolish thing, he said that the same ghost haunted every house in the kingdom where there was superfluous wealth, if people had only the perception to hear and see it. I sometimes think the man is mad; he is so very odd; he alarms me.”

“What did he mean?”

“From what he said, I gathered that he thought the rich were in some way responsible for the degraded condition of the poor. He seems to think the children at least of the poor might be saved. But I can’t tell what he really believes; it may be all hypocritical cant. I am afraid of him, and I am really afraid of the ghost.”

They comforted her as well as they could. They did

not know her well enough to say what was uppermost in their minds. The mother would fain have said, "God is everywhere; in His loving presence what can harm you?" and the daughter, "You are too much alone, poor thing; if you had a good husband and a mother and sister always with you, you would not have a chance to feel afraid." Afterwards, when their speech was more peremptorily called for, they said these things, but now they could only beat round the subject, as strangers may, and glided from it to another.

They told her about Tod. He had taken a fever of rheumatic nature.

"I know nothing about him," said Marian fretfully. "It was the merest chance I had occasion to speak to him; but if he is in need——" She fingered her purse.

"No," said Star; "my husband says he can pay if he is not ill so long that he loses his situation. He is of some value as a draper's buyer, because he has really an exceptionally good eye for colour; but, if he can't travel, it would be difficult for him to get into new sort of work. He isn't clever."

"I should suppose not," said Marian with slight sarcasm. "But it is one of the surprising things in life how silly people manage to get a living."

They said that people who seemed weak in many ways had often some special talent. They instanced Mrs. Couples, telling how truly kind and careful she was, so that, although her house seemed ill-managed, her rooms were never vacant and her lodgers had a great regard for her. Star explained with satisfaction that her husband still had the habit of dropping in on his way home for a word with his former landlady.

When Marian left them she knew that she had been gossiping, and she was the better for it.

Whether Mrs. Thompson's opinion, that if Marian had had a more gracious confidence in the Divine Being in whom she believed she would not have distressed herself about the haunting of the house, was correct or not, Star's conclusion was certainly correct, that family life would have banished her morbid fears. But who that is morbid knows it? Marian, with all her intelligence, only half guessed that it was she herself, rather than the house, that was haunted. Whatever happened to arrest her emotions in any way recurred again and again to her thoughts, often gathering importance with time, rather than losing it in the natural, wholesome way. She was habitually gracious to the servants, attentive to her uncle, and not neglectful of the new social obligations his wealth created for her; yet there were many gaps to be filled by self-subsisting existence. She had no one else to live in and to—she lived for others; but all the blank that was left by the lack of what those who loved her would have given was filled up by restless, uneasy feelings. If she made a call on neighbouring gentry, some supposed blunder or awkwardness of her own would dog her path for days. She was uneasy about her uncle's man, Gilchrist. His peculiarities persistently attracted her notice, and the thought that all was not right preyed on her mind. She was haunted by the thought of the ghost story, and now she was followed, too, by the remembrance of Tod lying ill and the doubt if, after all, she was bound in any way to feel concern for him. Now, too, she was shadowed by the thought of Star, but that was a happy haunting.

The bright face, the gay air, the tiny home, that seemed to her filled only with perfect love, grew upon her heart with stronger and stronger attraction. Why did she care so much to see Star again? The freshly tinted cheek, the prettily turned chin, the young eyes so full of interest external, so lacking in all thought of self,—these, no doubt, were the primary cause. Star was a young person of great attraction when attention was once drawn to her charms. Hubert had seen this at a glance; Dr. Bramwell had discovered it more slowly; Marian was learning it now, but in a more selfless and perfect way, as the true love of a woman for a woman must usually be more selfless, more perfect, than that which a man bestows on her.

The buds in the beech copse swelled and broke into leaf; the hyacinths faded in the grass; laburnums bloomed.

“Go and return Miss Gower’s call!” exclaimed Hubert to his wife, repeating her words to him.

“Why not? She came to call first on me, you know.”

“The devil she did!”

“Hubert, I have often told you you must not say such words. If one slipped out before mother!”

He sat, his day’s work done, looking at his wife with a glance of undisguised curiosity and admiration.

“I decline to give any advice on the subject of your acquaintances. I told you you’d be turned out if you went into old Gower’s grounds, but, instead of that, you’ve got the lady to call on you. It seems you can pilot your own course, so by all means go on in your own way.”

“I shall go because I like her,” said Star. “I take a fancy to her.”

She was folding the supper cloth, and stood with the white folds in her hands and looked out of the window. It seemed that she meditated something for a moment, for her face softened, and a warm light came into her eyes. She stood erect, as only women with strong, well-knit muscles stand; her hands looked firm and skilful to finish the work that for a moment was suspended.

Hubert crossed the room to her.

“Like her as much as you choose, my girl, but don’t like her better than me.” He put his hand, not roughly, under her chin, and turned the face for a hasty kiss. He went to his carpenter’s bench, at which he loved to work.

Not that night, but another, Marian told about her new acquaintance as she sat at her uncle’s dinner table. She sat in jewels and lace. At her right hand was a worn-out colonel—worn out, but not with work or ill health honestly come by. Opposite her was that red-eyed, white-faced man who was her uncle. His puffy hand lay by the stem of a wine-glass, his gouty feet were stretched on a cushioned rest. And Marian spoke about Star; not any one word of what she thought or felt did she tell, but the bare facts, that must be told some time if she ever wished to treat Star as an equal in her uncle’s house.

“American ladies, and lost their fortunes! The deuce they did. How do you know they ever had it to lose?”

“She told me so.”

“And now she’s married a newspaper fellow. They’re a stupid lot, invariably write things wrong; and he’s of a

low grade. But it might be worse. Scribes from ancient times have the right to 'Esquire.' "

"You said she was young and pretty." The colonel stroked his moustache. There was a drawl on the words, not prolonged enough to be rude, in his tone. "I should say, then, it didn't matter much about the husband or the fortune either—eh, Gower?"

Gower laughed, or made an apology for a laugh, to acknowledge his friend's wit.

"Have her here, by all means," he said.

The laburnum hung out its blossoms and shed them; the ground under the apple trees had a fleece of white and pink; leaves grew big.

Star seemed in no hurry to pay her call. Some instinct taught her the value of time to crescent love.

CHAPTER IV.

STAR'S married life had just begun to work itself out in the plain pattern of working days, when there began to be woven through it a new thread of jet, black with anxiety and the thought of suffering, glistening with hope. She began to desire greatly that the surgical treatment which promised to restore the use of Richarda's crippled limb might now be procured.

At first she did not think of it as a near possibility, but thoughts shape themselves by the course of daily events.

Young Dr. Bramwell came to see the invalids in their

new home. Hubert had made him understand he was to be paid for his visits, so he did not come so often; but no one who walked on the brink of the precipice of death, as Mrs. Thompson did, ought, in his opinion, to be left entirely without a doctor's care. He made up his mind to make his fees nominal.

On this, his first visit there, he said, "And then, there is your sister—what of her?"

He spoke to Star as she stood, with new matronly dignity, at her house door to show him out.

"Oh—Richarda," she said with hesitation. She did not immediately say more. It gave her some slight uneasiness that Bramwell had found them again so soon, and should urge the continuance of his visits. She could not at once collect her thoughts to know what was best to say about Richarda.

So Bramwell left the question to work its own way.

Star's attention was turned once more to her sister's constant suffering, and to the only way of its relief. She did not speak her thoughts; to the minds of these women, inexperienced in surgical matters, the idea of the necessary operation was fraught with black horror. They had once prepared themselves to meet it, but misfortune had turned them back, and now Star would not bring forward again what, as yet, she saw no way of accomplishing.

As to Bramwell, her sentiment toward him and his kind officiousness was as inconsistent as human sentiment when complex invariably is. Personal liking, gratitude for his genuine kindness, an undefined fear that he might be finding in his liking for her an incentive to this kindness unconfessed to himself—these were mingled with a

sore grudge against him for having received her confidence on that distracted night of her mother's sudden increase of illness. She knew she had confessed to him that love was not the foremost reason of her marriage. Her new loyalty to Hubert rebelled against this memory; the rebellion emphasized the memory, and a feeling of offence toward Bramwell was the unreasonable result. She could have forgiven a thousand faults in a man who showed such unflagging attention to her mother, but she could not forgive him this, which was no fault of his, that she had happened to speak imprudently to him.

Yet there was nothing in Bramwell's manner to suggest that he had given a second thought to that unlooked-for confidence. He had a cheerful, busy way with him always, as if he basked in a continual present, like a willing horse to which one does not naturally attribute memories. Star's nature was, moreover, too sweet to dwell on a grudge or make much of it. Without consideration, she tried instinctively to forget and live it down, to forget also that idea that his manner to her betokened admiration.

Bramwell came again, not too soon.

"Your sister ought to go into the hospital for that operation," he said.

Star clasped her hands nervously. The thought of herself or of Bramwell went utterly from her.

"I know," she said slowly, "that it seems so to you; but to be a private patient in the hospital would cost more than we can possibly afford. And then, mother has old-fashioned ideas; she could not think of a hospital ward as a comfortable place to any one accustomed to comfort. We have been rich, you know." She looked

up to him pleadingly. Her last sentence was simply pathetic; there was not a hint of pride or vanity. "Richarda would not be separated from mother, you know. She would rather go on suffering."

"I know," he said. He was moved to see for the moment only as she saw. Although he really believed the hospital to be safer than the home for Richarda, he did not urge his belief. "My father, I think, spoke to Mrs. Thompson about it before, and so did one of the deacons of the chapel," he remarked, as if to admit that the matter was settled.

That day it happened that Bramwell went on down the road to call on Mr. Gower in his father's stead. It also happened that he was shown for a few minutes into Marian's drawing-room, and that he mentioned to her his visit to Kent's cottage.

"You know them?" His face brightened as he looked at Marian in answer to her appreciative words.

It was natural that these two should begin their talk about Kent's household in the light of their mutual labours for the culture of the lower classes at "Babbitts." They both entered a protest against such beginning.

"I felt that I could make a real friend of Mrs Kent."

"Oh," cried he, "she is a lady. So is the mother; so are they all. I don't know when my interest has been so awakened. I confess I entertain a very high admiration for Mrs. Kent."

Marian remembered the sunbeam that had fallen upon him as he read about love and honour in the dingy schoolroom. The memory only came because it was there, in that ray of light, that she had happened to see

him last, yet he had brought with him now, into her somewhat gloomy drawing-room, something more than the mere memory of the sunbeam, something akin to it. His healthy, handsome countenance, with its rich colouring of ruddy beard and bright blue eyes, gave forth a certain light of itself; but the flash of frank, out-leaping sympathy seemed more than sunshine to Marian, who in that house found none of it.

“We knew something of them before the marriage,” he said. “My father, as you know, always keeps a number of such unfortunate people on his list.”

“His work among the poor is well known,” interrupted Marian, murmuring her knowledge and approbation in the same breath.

“I was going to say that I had reason to believe that this young Mrs. Kent is not only a charming woman, but has elements of real heroism in her character; indeed, I may say that I know her to be capable of the utmost self-sacrifice.” He went no further. He would have thought it dishonourable to suggest the form he believed Star’s sacrifice to have taken. “You may smile at my vehemence, Miss Gower, but I get greatly interested in some of the humbler people my father and I visit. I believe in enthusiasm. My father does not; he is systematically benevolent on principle, and I often tell him I think that is where he sometimes fails in accomplishing that which he would be glad to see accomplished—the drawing of different classes nearer together for mutual help and benefit. When you speak of making friends with Mrs. Kent, I think you strike the keynote of the only true way of helping any one.”

“But when I said that I only meant to say that I did not feel any difference of class between Mrs. Kent and myself. She impressed me decidedly as belonging to the more gentle and refined class of Americans, and these, when they come to us in the pride of wealth, are received everywhere.”

“Exactly what I feel. Indeed, Mrs. Thompson is a woman whom, if she were starving, one could not patronize. Still, of course, this marriage has stamped them now with Kent’s class in life.”

He looked at Marian with expectancy, as if wondering if she would stand to her guns and again proclaim her desire for friendship.

“What seems to me so perfectly refined about Mrs. Kent is, that she accepts the situation so entirely; there is no harping on what she has been accustomed to, and no apologizing for what she has not; she finds nothing beneath her.”

He lifted his eyes to Marian’s in a smile of perfect comprehension; his soul seemed to beam upon hers for the moment, yet the occasion was trifling.

“Exactly,” he said again. “A superficial refinement feels itself above everything that does not appear fine.”

It was a small thing on which they had agreed; the sentiment was almost trite, but the agreement was so perfect, it seemed to give him a certain glow of pleased interest in her. Marian could not but feel the reflex of the glow.

“Yes,” she went on, “a lady’s-maid, when she marries a man of plainer manners than her own, feels above him; but I notice Mrs. Kent speaks always as if she looked up to her husband.”

Bramwell dropped his glance to the gloves he held in his hands.

“Kent is a fine fellow,” he said thoughtfully. “He has been uncommonly generous for a man in his position. I feel no doubt that the marriage was quite the best thing that could come to them; they were practically starving. It seems a pity, though”—here he looked up, seeking her assent—“whatever caste is worth, she has lost it.”

It did seem a pity. Marian thought of Star—her prettiness, her charms—and perfectly agreed again with his wistful comment. Her uncle never agreed with her on any subject. This was luxury.

“Therefore,” he said, “I admire you the more for making a friend of her—I do, indeed, Miss Gower—and I don’t think it the less a good work because you feel little dissimilarity of tastes. We need that the classes should become more friendly with one another, but it is absurd to expect the extremes of upper and lower to embrace and find anything in common; it is on the borderland that amalgamation ought to begin, and I think it begins more nobly there. Many a fine lady will try to do good in the slums, and moan over her failure, and yet refuse to shake hands with her dress-maker.”

His eyes brightened and lightened as his speech went on, until, at the end, his soul seemed again to beam in his face straight upon her own. She had never thought before of what he had just said, but again she agreed and, in the perfect agreement, she felt that her soul had somehow been looked at too closely, and she experienced the need of interposing conventionality as a screen.

"I am afraid you are a socialist." She laughed an unmeaning little laugh.

He too drew back a little. He was earnest, if he was anything, and he felt some jar he did not pause to understand. Gilchrist came to answer his inquiries, and he rose to go in his best professional manner, but paused to say—

"No, I do not claim to be a socialist, except in so far as I believe in brotherly love between all men. Take care of the brotherly love, and society will take care of itself, I should say. But love between fellow men implies trust, and trust needs understanding, and it comes back to the same thing—that the classes must shake hands, and be what you call 'really friends.'"

"You have thought deeply on these subjects," said Marian, standing. His words appeared to her the words of wisdom, but possibly that was because he was so handsome.

Bramwell went out of the room with Gilchrist.

When they were gone, Marian paced up and down the room. Some ancients thought that pleasure was a slow motion of the brain; if so, Marian's brain was then in motion. The young man had brought happiness into the room with him, as he might have brought a perfume. A little while after he left, it passed away again. It is a great gift thus to be able to carry happiness.

Gilchrist, perceiving the gift, used influence to have the junior rather than the senior physician in his master's sitting-room as often as might be. Youth has a power of its own to lift age out of its self-consciousness. Gilchrist was kind to his master in wishing for the young man's visits, but Charles Bramwell did not

appreciate the preference; he went as seldom as might be; he grudged the time given. The gold of the old man's fee was nothing to him in his young enthusiasm for humanity, and, among human beings, he discriminated as to which should have his enthusiasm.

CHAPTER V.

THAT night Marian retired to her own room feeling glad, as she always did, that her solitary evening in the drawing-room had come to an end. Her uncle and his friend the colonel were lounging in an upper billiard-room; the house was not yet shut for the night, although most of the servants were gone to bed.

Marian felt much less lonely in the quiet and darkness of her own bedroom than in the larger rooms. The light put out, she opened the window to the dewy warmth of the June night, and, white-robed, glided to her place among the pillows.

Eleven o'clock struck from the spire of the nearest church. Marian was almost dozing. She thought, as she always did think when alone in darkness, of the ghost tale; but she had never heard the haunting cry, and gradually she had grown accustomed to the idea of the tale and its contradicting silence.

She had almost slept, when suddenly all her nerves were thrilled. Surely that was a baby crying! A little wail of hoarse, short cries it gave. "I could not have imagined it, for I did not remember that babies cried in

that way." Marian spoke with quiet dignity to herself as she sat up, very much as she would have spoken to an incredulous friend. She sat amid the fine linen of her bed; the large room was undisturbed, the furniture showed like stately shadows here and there in the almost darkness, but there was nothing in its well-known modern shape to suggest terror.

Again that cry—certainly a wailing infant's cry, coming she could not tell whence.

Marian was not a girl; she was not panic-stricken. She disliked it very much. In that house any other sound would have made her less nervous. Yet, now that she really heard the sound that had so long been the object of her aversion, she braced herself to endure and consider it intelligently.

There was silence for a few minutes; what she had heard seemed like a dream. But again she heard it. In that hour and place, a wailing baby! Could it be of flesh and blood?

She made herself get up and go to the window, for if the sound were physical, it must come from thence. On any other side of the house it would have seemed more possible, but her window looked out on a thicket of laurels surrounded on all sides by a thorn hedge; beyond was a short bit of covered yew walk, seldom traversed by any one, not leading to the house except by a roundabout path. If Marian's window had not been well above the laurels it would have let in but little light; as it was, it looked down in the day-time upon their glistening tops, and at night upon their impenetrable darkness. From the back of the house a long line of unused and locked conservatories extended and

glimmered white, but they were too far away to form a hiding-place for the child who gave this cry, if child it were.

She stood at the window now, to reassure her judgment that that was the last place any human baby was likely to be in, carried by whomsoever. The servants' rooms and entrances were at the other side of the house; in a room beneath hers, whose window was darkened by the laurels, Gilchrist slept.

Again came the cry. Such a pitiful weak wailing! Her heart forgot all fear; it was wrung by only one desire—to get the baby in her arms and comfort it. She looked about wildly, leant out of the window to listen, drew back to the centre of the room and listened. She could not tell where the sound came from, whether from the window or floor or walls; but one thing heartened and strengthened her—it certainly came from some definite place, for it grew less as she retreated; it was not mysteriously around her in the room, as a ghostly cry might be.

She began hastily dressing herself. It seemed to her, although she was pitifully inexperienced, that the cry was not that of a very young infant. The voice sounded weak, either through long wailing or illness, but she thought it was not like that of a babe in the first weeks of its life.

She paused in reaching for her dressing-gown, arrested by hearing the murmur of speech amid the cries—such a curious murmur of sound, a sort of whispered whine. She was confused for a moment with the strong idea that she had some time heard a voice like it in cadence. Now she knew! It was a beggar woman

who used to stand on the parade whose voice she had thought of ; but that could have no connection here.

The murmur stopped. The baby still cried.

Surely, surely if she could get it into her own warm arms and stop its little mouth with kisses and pace her room with it, if need be, it would cease wailing and be comforted. She thought this instinctively, not with her reasonable mind.

She threw her dress upon her with breathless speed, then paused again to listen.

The cry was distinctly lessening, as if smothered by a cloak or carried to a greater distance. She listened several moments, standing alert, ready to run. Losing the sound, she tarried no longer, but ran along the upper hall, down the central staircase. She stopped, uncertain which way to turn, under the swinging lantern at the foot of the stair. The front door was before her, the drawing-rooms on either side. Should she explore first the interior, or the laurels and bushes in the warm black night without ?

The quiet, familiar aspect of the stairs and hall made her waver in her quest. It struck her as absurd to begin rushing about to find a child in precincts where children were not.

Just then she noticed that the front door was ajar. In a moment Gilchrist entered. He started slightly at seeing her, as was not unnatural, for she looked excited, and was not in her ordinary garb.

“Where have you been, Gilchrist ?”

He stooped to bolt the door as he answered, “I went out on the steps before fastening the door for the night. It's a fine night, but dark.”

He had not well finished what he said before she roused to her first purpose by seeing the bolt slip, signed hastily to him to unfasten it again, and walked out into the night. She stood a moment on the top of the wide stone steps and descended them to the carriage drive. She glided round by a narrower path toward that side of the house where her window was. She paused in sight of the black laurels and turned again. Everywhere she listened and peered into the darkness, across the lawn and under the trees. The air was thick with perfume of flowers and sweet foliage. A great sycamore not far off hung out its leaves in rounded clouds of blackness. Silence and darkness seemed to be wooing one another undisturbed. Marian, in her trailing light gown, came back across the drive, looking like a slight, helpless thing, baffled by the vastness of the night.

Gilchrist stood upon the steps, looking down upon her, surprise and concern manifest in his attitude and face. So disappointed and foolish did she feel, so wistful with that great feeling of pity which the babe's cry had aroused in her, that she would fain have confided something of her troubled feeling to him, if not by words by allowing a natural expression of face and tone. Had she been able for one moment to consider him as a human being, she might have acted naturally and properly; but Marian was conventional with that conventionality which tortures noble principles into mean rules of action. Gilchrist was a man, and he was a servant.

"Gilchrist," she began (the word itself said, "I am quite indifferent to what has occurred, but, although you are only a servant, I may as well explain to you why I

went out”), “I thought I heard a child crying. I thought possibly some one had brought one about.”

“I am sorry you have heard anything that troubled you.”

The remark appeared to be aimed more at her real state of feeling than she liked.

“I suppose there can’t be a child anywhere,” she said coldly, but still looking about with a puzzled air at the hall and the various doors round it.

“There are certainly none in the house or near it now,” he said.

“Oh, very well. If you are sure of that there is nothing more to be said. Mr. Gower trusts you entirely to close the house, Gilchrist.” Had she made the suspicious addition, “I *hope* you are trustworthy,” she could not have conveyed an unkind meaning more clearly.

She really walked up the stairs very grandly, her head erect, and a magnificent indifference in every line of her trailing gown; and it was all completely thrown away, for the man at the bottom of the stair was not thinking of her airs in the least. His expression was rather that of a brave man, weary at heart, ready to crave help from the true, kind, woman’s heart which he knew she possessed.

He watched her up the stair. He put his hand on the railing with an impulse to follow and speak to her. Then he turned uneasily to his responsible work of examining the fastenings of the house.

There was nothing romantic-looking about this man. His features were plain, his whiskers bushy, his form stout. Yet he held within him a heroic purpose and a brave heart.

As for Marian, she was puzzled and worried. When she lay down again she perceived, going over the thing in memory, the equivocal nature of Gilchrist's replies. She tossed about, full of suspicious imaginings.

CHAPTER VI.

NEXT day Star made her first formal call on Miss Gower. Never once did it occur to her to feel out of place in the drawing-room of the big house, or to suppose that her hostess had been obliged to ask permission to receive her there. If Miss Gower had not happened to have a rich uncle, would she not be worse off than Star; nay, would she not be much better off than she was even now if she had a humbler home and a husband as kind as Hubert? That was the way Star looked at it. She did not suspect patronage because she did not expect it. She greeted her hostess with simple kindness.

Marian did not patronize, but she felt a certain elation of heroism, an elation born of Bramwell's sympathy and admiration. In all that is true there is something false; in the music of the truest friendship there are some false notes, and they sometimes come thick at the beginning. Marian's natural liking for Star was a much nobler thing than her conscious generosity, but they mingled in the warmth of her kindness.

The incident of the preceding night had this bearing on Star's visit, that Marian was really overwrought, troubled, and nervous; and again, under the influence of

so frank a sympathy, she told her tale and sought advice. Star had not much remark to make or counsel to give, but she listened, and that was much. Then she, in turn, spoke of anxiety in a general way, and began to particularize, as gossips do, upon her own case, and told of her desire for Richarda, what Bramwell had said, what she feared and wished.

The confidence was in neither case complete, nor did it profess to be; it was only going round the outside of things.

They talked of hospitals, agreed that the one in town was not of the best. They could talk with unreserve about that external theme.

Ah, well, such talking lightens the heart and is a real good, but it does not alter circumstances. Marian felt relieved in spirits, but her cause of uneasiness remained. When Star went home it remained true, as before, that Richarda was suffering, that the only way of relief was painful enough at the best, and that its pain would be increased a thousandfold to her sensitive, imaginative nature, by being obliged to enter the common ward of a hospital. This increase might be all in the idea; but ideas were real to Richarda, and to her mother for her sake.

Bramwell came again to the cottage. He was undoubtedly officious; perhaps his officiousness was right, perhaps not; he was evidently true-hearted, bent, upon all things, on doing good.

"I have only come in for a friendly chat; this is not a professional visit," he said, meaning that he would not put it in his bill, and they understood.

He spoke to Mrs. Thompson. He was sitting in the

front room, talking to her. Richarda's lounge was in the room that day. Star was there.

"The fact is, I have come to talk about this operation."

They each felt the heart tremor of the others. They looked at him solemnly.

"We all know that it ought to be done. You decided that before you came half across the world to attend to it. My father has no doubt about the expediency of it, nor have I; and Bloom is the man to do it." (Bloom was the surgeon whose name had made the name of the town more famous.) "You don't want Miss Thompson to go into the hospital," he continued cheerily, although, indeed, he was speaking to an awful barrier of troubled fear. "Well, what I have come to say is, have it done here. The upper room is light enough and large enough. My father knows Bloom, and so do I; he will come and do it if we ask him, and he need not come more than perhaps twice. I will attend the recovery, and report to him."

"No," said Star; "my husband would not let us take any part of it as a charity, and——"

"There would be some expense involved—you would need a trained nurse for at least a week—but not the expense you imagine; and as for my time, you know, it's not so very valuable yet. People won't trust me when they can get my father."

How bright his blue eyes were, how honest his laugh! How like an electric flash relieving the overcharged atmosphere his little pleasantry about his fees! They smiled in answer to his smile, and felt their hearts—that were, oh, so heavy on this terrible subject—lighter.

“We could not add in the slightest to my son-in-law’s expenses.” The mother spoke with firm dignity. “He has” (a slight pause), “as you know, been more than generous already.”

“This is not an ordinary thing.” He leaned toward Star. “There is no doubt that it will save your sister great suffering, and in all probability restore her power of walking.”

There was an eagerness in Richarda’s eyes that told *what* suffering better than aught else could. One suffers much before one is eager to bear the surgeon’s knife.

He looked for a moment at Richarda’s eyes. “I think it must be managed,” he said; and then he bent forward to examine and admire a fitting Hubert had put on the grate. It was a narrow pane of glass suspended as a blower above the upper part of the opening to prevent the chimney smoking and act as a screen to the eyes. He had never seen anything more ingenious, he said. He looked at it, handled it, asked questions about it. He was quite absorbed in it till he rose to go. Surely the operation in question could not be such an awful thing if the man who took the responsibility of urging it could, a moment after, become so much interested in a fire-blower! Hitherto it had seemed something which, even if it could be compassed, was too dreadful to be freely discussed. Their hearts were much lightened. Now, at least, he had accomplished this, that they could talk of it cheerfully among themselves.

Star attended him to the door. When one is one’s own maid-of-all-work, what else can be done? It was afternoon, and the young lime trees up and down the road were casting light green shadows. Star was dressed

as ladies dress. She stood at leisure in the little brick portal, considering his words. She felt a glow of gratitude for his delicate kindness which she could not try to repress.

He looked at her with undisguised admiration. He knew no other woman who could have lit fires, washed, cooked, and served, as this one had that day, and yet have remained so imperturbable in her pretty ladyism.

“I thank you very much,” said Star. Her voice would not come with clear dignity; it faltered on such a momentous theme. “But I hardly think my husband would submit to—to taking anything that was not——”

“I understand”—hastily. “I honour his feeling, and also Mrs. Thompson’s scruple about adding to his expense; but the end to be gained is so great. You cannot, at least, object to my asking Bloom what, as a mere matter of business, is the lowest figure he would do it for?”

“Could you ask that?” She raised doubtful eyes to him. “If I knew what he said, I should perhaps have a clearer idea as to whether it would be possible.”

“Well, if you wish to know, I am not sure but that I can tell you pretty nearly without asking him. He would do it for you for twenty-five or thirty pounds; and the nurse, my fees, medicine, and all attendant expenses would be another fifteen pounds. Now, it is not much to ask of a fellow like Bloom, who bowls in guineas by the thousand from rich folk, that he would remit his fee, and there you have the whole expenses down to fifteen pounds. Consider the gain.” He took his driving whip from the lintel of the door against which he had leaned it, and signed to the urchin in tiny

livery who was guardedly exercising the horse in his trap. "I feel that it ought to be done, Mrs. Kent. I think in Bloom's hands there is no fear but that it will be most successful. I will watch her afterwards most carefully. I will come three times a day if need be." At that, without looking at her again, he went away; he had shaken hands in the room.

Star did not stand to watch him drive off, but she did go into the kitchen and stand a few minutes by herself. She loved her sister; her heart beat high at the thought of this physical salvation for her. But it was not of Richarda that it seemed necessary for her to think at that moment; something else was more instant—a thought which had troubled her before rose again in her mind. Why should Bramwell be so ardent in bringing this salvation? Was he in this only devoting himself to the high duties of his profession, or—— Here thought paused, abashed. She remembered Miss Gower's remark about her marriage, that the fairy prince had come just in time. No; she knew that was not true of Hubert. He was no fairy prince, nor could he be said to have come as such princes do. But if—if she had not answered that advertisement, if she had not married Hubert, would a prince have come? Had he been on his way when she had rashly forestalled him?

But then she *had* married Hubert.

It is difficult indeed for any one on earth to penetrate the secret of the might-have-been. Star, standing in her clean kitchen, looking out at the few green things in her little back garden, certainly could not attempt to do it. She left the question, as her simple mind left many questions, as a bee leaves a flower when, after working

a golden path down its chalice, it finds no honey there. She had another flower of petalled circumstance to investigate—the immediate future rather than the past. This held the honey of scope for virtuous decision.

Bramwell might have become her prince—who could tell? But she had married Hubert, and now this other was urging a plan which would bring him a constant visitor to the house. He said he would come three times a day if need be. She did not doubt it. He had proved his readiness and power of service. Ought she to let him come? Her mind had worked itself down now to the bottom of the flower-bell—her problem. It sucked the honey without delay. She was very fond of Hubert—far too happy with him to let it be a matter of moment to her whether she ever saw another man or not. It was Richarda's good only that she must consider. She would speak to Hubert and urge Bramwell's proposal.

Her conscience told her she had thought rightly. Her honey was pure, and, bee-like, she flitted off to put the treasure to use.

She flitted first to kiss Richarda and her mother, although why such kisses should have been bestowed at that moment she could have shown no logical reason. Those concerned received them as a propitious omen. She cracked jokes with Richarda as she sat sewing for an hour. They had fallen back into their long habit of joking together, which the solemn suddenness of Star's marriage had, for a time, interrupted. Their mother was no humourist, but she laughed to see them laugh—laughed usually when they laughed, understood their homely wit, although no other wit would have greatly moved her.

They were in gay, though not in lighthearted humour; the excitement of Bramwell's words had been as a stimulant to them. Thus they were chatting all together when Marian paid another visit. She had come half thirsting for, half fearing, the renewal of the fascination which Star exercised over her. She found the small room full—Richarda on her couch, the mother with her darning-basket, Star at a dainty sewing. They all welcomed her—Star with a loving glance, Richarda with a critical one.

Before Marian had well finished her first speeches, Richarda had challenged her on a theme which had come up before her entrance. Long confinement had made Richarda odd. When she had begun to talk few things could stop her—not a gentle-looking visitor like Miss Gower.

“Did you ever think of the difference between beggars and paupers?” she asked. “If you beg, you live by chance; but if you paup, you——”

“I beg your pardon.”

“‘Paup.’ It is the verb from the noun. ‘To paup’ is to live on a regular dole of some sort. Since we lost our money, mother and I paup on Star; but the woman who comes round with the baby, asking for pennies, only begs. It is a more free and independent life. It seems to me to have many noble attributes which the other has not.”

There was such brightness in her words, her clear eye and intelligent face showed such an evident pleasure in the fantastic for the mere sake of fantasy, that Marian, used only to the ordinary in mental exercise, followed her meandering without distaste.

"It does not follow," said Star, "that, because beggars beg, paupers must paup, because mendicants don't mend."

Mrs. Thompson was darning Hubert's socks. She ran in the needle skilfully and laughed softly. "They certainly don't," she said.

Richarda was searching the visitor's face with swift, invisible glances. She seemed to perceive there a surprise that they could make their dependent position a matter of joke. Opening her clear eyes large on Marian, she said—

"We do not distress ourselves about it, you know, because, firstly, we cannot help it; and, secondly, Star's husband is so very nice. And, even if anything is distressing, it is better to laugh at it than not."

Thus taken into confidence as if she were an old friend, Marian drew her chair nearer the couch with pleasant sense of having some share in their sentiments.

"I am sure he is very nice."

"Have you seen him?" Richarda seemed a little surprised at the tone of assurance.

"I am sure from what you and Mrs. Kent have said."

Feeling that she had perhaps claimed a knowledge to which she appeared to have no right, she looked slightly toward Star, expecting her to admit that she had told much about her husband; but Star was unconsciously occupied with thought or feeling not wholly at ease. Marian swiftly became aware of something on the young wife's face which suggested rather intent consideration of her husband than entire satisfaction in him. It was only for a moment, only the faint reflection of an inward wonder that seemed scarcely to pause in its passage through the mind. Yet it had its counter-

part in the mother's face—yes, and in Richarda's too, while she answered—

“Oh, he is exceedingly kind, with quite that best sort of kindness which does not seem to be much aware of itself.”

The words were honest and warm; all that they lacked was pause at the end, which a sentence which fears no challenge naturally gives itself. Richarda's sentence about Hubert seemed to trip at the end and run forward, as if with the impetus of a stumble, into the next subject.

“Do you know,” she said cosily, still turning full toward Marian, “I am very glad you came while my couch is in this room. Star has told me about you, and other people have spoken of you. As I lie here I picture everybody and everything I hear of, and I have woven quite a romance about you.”

“I am sure my appearance contradicts it.”

“No; you look just as I thought, because I don't think I put many details into your image. To tell the truth, you were not the principal figure in the tale, only the pivot of it.”

“What was the tale?”

“I cannot tell you, for it is not distinct at all, only a nebulous confusion. There is a baby that people seem to play ball with, and I am convinced he must be the heir to some grand estate or something.”

“A baby!”—in astonishment. It was a word at which Marian was nervous.

“Richarda,” said Star, “you ought not to begin in the middle of things in that absurd way. It is enough to confuse any one.”

Richarda began again. "There was an old woman, a poor wretched creature, used to come to our room where we lived before Star married. She carried a baby. One day she was very drunk, and she told mother she had a husband who rolled in riches and lived on the parade. She was so drunk that mother took the child from her. She went away. Then a mysterious man came and took away the child. He just came in and held out his arms, and Star gave it him, and he took a cab and drove away. Now, who that ever read a novel would not perceive in an instant that that baby was wanted to be got rid of because it was an heir, or wanted to personate an heir who had been got rid of, or something?"

Richarda stopped so gravely at the end of the questioning inflection, that Marian was almost beguiled into saying doubtfully that she did not see the proof was complete. She just saved herself from this literalism.

"Let that be set down in the tale as an ascertained fact—that a child, who is suddenly taken away by a middle-aged, business-like man, is evidently of great importance to some one's self-interest, legally or otherwise. Then, to proceed, Star meets Hubert, and he lends her an umbrella, whereupon she marries him."

"My love," expostulated the mother. A sore spot had been touched.

"Dear mammy mine, let me tell the truth. Star herself cannot give a more rational account of her proceedings, which were eminently suitable to the situation."

"And so successful," urged Star.

It would seem that the mother's wince of pain must

be soothed before the tale of which Marian was the pivot could go on. When she smiled again, Richarda went on; but Marian, wondering what the full meaning of the tiny interlude was, lost the beginning.

Standing near was a large bowl of celandine; the flowers filled the bowl to running over. There was grass amongst them; they smelt of cool woodlands. This bowl seemed the most conspicuous thing in the little room—that and the women. The mother plied her needle. Star had forgotten herself; she leaned back idle in her chair. It seemed to Marian that she would have done her share of making joy for the world if she had always leaned back idle, considering, with dimpled cheeks and abstracted eyes, something which was not before her. There is much in a dimple that shows where a glance is directed, much in the line of the cheek, the contour of the chin—Star's glance was not directed at anything in the room, yet, so lightly had it taken flight, so brightly did it come again, she did not seem to neglect her friend, and Richarda was entertaining Marian.

“He lived with Mrs. Couples, on this road further in, and there you went to see Mr. Tod.”

Marian was completely recalled. She hated the name of Tod.

“We came to live here, and you came to live in the nearest fine residence. That, you will admit, was a very remarkable coincidence. In a novel it would mean much.”

“Would it?” said Marian. “But it was not so very strange, because people tend to come out of town in spring, as birds to fly northward. And there was a reason in both cases why we could not go far. My

uncle finds the railway too painful, and Mr. Kent has his business. Besides, we had almost chosen this house last year."

Richarda waved her hand. "I am telling you a tale. Real life is inconsequent, I have observed; but in a tale everything means something. You visited at Mrs. Couples's; then you came to live near us. That was strange; but the strangest thing of all is, that Mr. Gower's valet—that stoutish man who often drives with him—is the man who helped to play ball with the baby."

Marian fairly started now. An uneasy feeling came over her as at a weird tale, but the peace of the summer afternoon was too evident in the little room. The half-drawn window-blinds revealed the shadow of the low row of houses as it fell half across the sunny road, which had many passers. Inside the women held their cheerful court.

"We first recognized him a few days after you told Star you had heard the child's ghost, and naturally we wanted to ask him what he had done with the baby; but it seems that infant is used for rounders, for yesterday the old woman came to mother begging again, and in her arms was the very baby."

"It is very ill, poor lamb," said Mrs. Thompson, shaking her head. "It was quite pitiful to see its little limbs all wasted."

"Mother would like to take it in. If she had a house of her own I am quite sure she would steal it."

"A few days' good nursing might save its life," Mrs. Thompson said wistfully.

"Don't you think," said Marian with hesitation,

“that the happiest fate for children in that class of life is to die in infancy?”

“Maybe; but one never thinks that when one sees them ailing—poor, wee things.”

“That you think it had better die just proves what you told us the valet had said,” went on Richarda, “that we all ought to be haunted by them, because under different circumstances we let them die just as the man who lived in your house did.”

Marian did not argue. She was aware she was speaking to ward off for a few minutes the surprised train of thought the story forced upon her.

“Are you sure,” she asked doubtfully, turning to Richarda, “that Gilchrist took the child? You may have been mistaken.”

“We may,” said Star, “but we do not think so.”

Star drew Miss Gower away. She wanted to show her house. It was very neat. Star showed its appointments from garret to cellar with genuine interest—showed it all but half the tiny attic, which was walled off and locked.

“My husband keeps his tools and carpenter’s bench in there. He likes to keep it locked. We call it the Blue-beard room.”

“Is he fond of such work?” asked Marian mechanically, her mind on the beggar-woman.

“Oh, very fond; and he is so clever. He made half the small conveniences in the house. Did you notice the fire-blower in the parlour? Dr. Bramwell said——” Here in wifely pride she repeated all Bramwell had said.

Marian only half listened. Star, boasting sweetly of

her husband and displaying the home he had given her, was a very sweet sight, very lovable to Marian, but the details escaped her. They came down and stood in the tiny lobby, the door to the parlour shut, that to the street unopened.

“Do you think Gilchrist can have had this child at our house that night I heard it?” But her mind was really more troubled with another item of Richarda’s story. She remembered having heard some vague report that her own uncle had once been married, and that his wife had disgraced him. She could not speak of this, but said, “That old woman certainly cannot be the child’s mother. Is it possible she is Gilchrist’s wife? Is that what she means by her tale of a rich husband?”

“Oh, you must not heed Richarda’s nonsense,” said Star. “Please excuse it.”

Marian made a gesture of trouble. The sudden contrast of her own life with Star’s nest-like circumstances struck her painfully. For once she must make complaint.

And Star did what was natural to Star. She perceived a troubled, restless state of mind and heart, which words could not mend, and she put her arms round Marian’s neck and kissed her. She was not repulsed.

So it came to pass that these two women loved one another.

CHAPTER VII.

STAR had resolved to tell Hubert what Bramwell had said as soon as he came in that night. Hitherto she had not spoken to him about the means of curing Richarda, but it cost her no effort to break this silence. It was always easier to her to tell anything—whatsoever to whomsoever—than not to tell it. She felt sufficiently identified with her husband to speak even of further expense for her sister without effort. This said more for the truth of her marriage than she knew.

Yet that night, although she had fully intended to speak at once, she did not do so. When Hubert came he brought a surprise with him in the shape of a piano; indeed, he came driving in the van which brought the piano. It was a cottage instrument, and bought second-hand—not a fine one by any means, but still it was meant as a rare pleasure for them all, and when they saw it at the door they hailed it as such.

And Hubert drove with the van in order to help in with it. He looked quite like a drayman at the moment himself, more like that than like that undefined thing, a gentleman—at least, the mother and Richarda felt this as they watched him dismounting and tugging the thing in. They glanced in mind to Bramwell and to the possibility which it seemed to them might so easily have been. They did not speak, even to one another. They could not tell what Star thought.

She was lovely just then in her animation, flushed with pleasure and elate. Music in the home would be far more to her mother and sister than to herself, and, for that reason, Star had no alloy in her joy in receiving the gift. She bustled about to make room. "Oh, Hubert!" she cried, and, "Oh, Hubert!" When the old drayman was kneeling to set a castor right she came behind Hubert and gave him a soft little unexpected kiss below one ear. He took the caress quite steadily, as he took everything that came to him; but either the sibilant sound was more distinct than she thought, or the polished surface of the old rosewood reflected more than could have been supposed, for the workman growled out approbation.

"Ay, and if he'd not got the pianny such a bargain, he'd a' bought *that* cheap."

"That's so," said Hubert heartily.

But when Star had retreated, laughing, confused, and the man was gone, and Hubert came into the kitchen to wash his hands, he told her the gift was not for her.

"That old fellow's a sharp one," he remarked in commendation. He had enjoyed the incident hugely in his own unmoved way. "All the same, Star, the piano's not for you."

"Not for *me*?" She turned, making a comic gesture with the coffee-pot in her hand. "How now, sir?"

"No," imperturbably; "it's for mother. I heard you say it's her birthday to-morrow, and one day she told me how much she missed music on Sundays."

Star put down the empty coffee-pot on the stove, at the risk of burning the bottom out, and came across to him where he was splashing at the sink.

“Hubert!” she said. All that she could say was in the word. It meant that if he had deserved a kiss before, he now deserved a more ecstatic blessing.

“Well, don’t ‘Hubert’ me. She makes an uncommonly kind mother-in-law to me.”

Star ran, in a sort of whirlwind of rapture. “Mother, mother; it is for you. He brought it as a birthday present for you.” She clasped the feeble mother in her arms and laid her head on the dear familiar breast, and shed a few tears there, so happy she was.

Where one gives much perforce, to give a little more is to make all the gift lovely to the recipient, to make the giver irresistibly dear. To perceive this truth, not when stated, but in the experience of life, needs either the grace of a loving heart or an acute mind. By which avenue did Hubert come at it? If he wanted to provide a musical instrument for his house it cost him no more to call it a birthday gift to Star’s mother, cost him nothing to call her “mother,” when, without ostentation, he presented it. By doing so he certainly won more respect for himself than by any other way. He was a clever man, but like other men. Men have not unmixed motives. One may set self-interest first, but when the smile of pleased surprise in aged eyes gives real pleasure, the pleasure is not, however we may theorize, wholly selfish.

Star had periods in which the attitude of her mind towards her husband was that of intent effort to estimate his worth, but these were broken by times when she simply loved him without thought of how or why. So new was this husband to her that perhaps in any case mere newness would have made much critical

observation necessary. Yet it was more natural for Star to take for granted than to consider, and that her interludes of unperplexed devotion were shorter than those of consideration showed that she was instinctively puzzled, puzzled more than she knew, much more than she cared to own.

To-night, however, she looked in his clear, steady, gray eyes, in his dark face, with its small but almost regular features, and found nothing inscrutable in it. She loved, and was perfectly satisfied—till—till the next afternoon.

They could not try the music of the gift that evening. By the time Hubert had wedged the legs steady and Star had struck a few chords it was late, too late for the invalids to have the unwonted excitement of music. Hubert went without the tune he had asked for with a very good grace, and Star did not make the little speech she had planned telling of Bramwell and his suggestions.

The next day was Sunday, and when they were gathered in the front room in the early afternoon the piano was to be tried.

“Play and sing, Star,” said Hubert, expectant. He had never seen his wife display her accomplishment. He watched with some curious pride in her, and with the expectation of a merry or pathetic song. How could he know what they were accustomed to sing on Sunday?

Star could not touch the keys without emotion. The old home Sundays came before her eyes.

“I will play, and we will all sing,” she said. “Which shall it be, mother?”

"We always used to sing 'Heaven here first on Sundays,'" said Richarda.

"What's that?" Hubert asked.

"Father used to call it that," explained Star. "He thought it a good one for us always to begin with;" and, while she was speaking, she touched the keys into an old familiar hymn-tune.

They all sang. Star's rich young voice, Richarda's weak one, blended with the mother's thin, quivering strain. No exact science of song was theirs.

"What though thine earthly heart be sad,
Ashamed of self and sin,
God bids thee find an entrance glad
The heavenly courts within.

"Not far removed in time and space
God's realm of glory is;
One tear for sin, one sigh for grace,
And thou art wholly His.

"And thine is His sufficient strength
The conqueror to prove,
And thine the breadth and depth and length
Of God, thy Saviour's love."

The little triumphant tune came to an end as suddenly as it had commenced. Hubert had listened with the close attention one gives to any novelty. He began to feel a sense of intolerable discomfort, as though the coating of his mind had been rubbed the wrong way. Star was turning over the leaves of an old hymn-book to find another hymn.

Hubert's sense of discomfort was the same that the sound of wind moaning will arouse in some places and times, or that comes with the tolling of the passing bell, or with the distant sound of military music when the atmosphere is charged with rumour of war; that feeling

—perhaps the foreboding of a danger over which we have no control—which takes strong men unawares and makes them, not reasonably sad, but unreasonably irritable.

He felt that he had no reason to complain. That the sound of sacred music should proceed from the windows of his house on Sunday was a very respectable thing, and he had reasons for wishing to be very respectable. His mother-in-law, sitting by the window, her chastened face expressive of enjoyment in the music, her worn Bible open on her knee—she, too, was very respectable.

Star struck into another tune, but the key did not suit her. She stopped again.

“Isn't it wonderful to think of the bigness of things?” exclaimed Richarda inconsequently. Richarda's mind was off on an excursion. She turned her face upward on the couch, and said out what she was thinking in her abrupt, humourous way, “If the sun were hollow, and this world revolved in the centre, the moon could revolve round it at its natural distance, and yet be thousands of miles from the surface of the sun. And our system is surrounded by systems on systems so much larger that they dwarf it.”

“Isn't it absurd to suppose that the Creator of it all should notice us much?” said Hubert ill-naturedly.

Richarda did not notice the argument or attempt to answer it. “He takes care of the sparrows,” she affirmed. “As we live for ever, of course His way of taking care of us will be to make us perfect. Think of going on from sun to sun and star to star, being made perfect. That is, of course, if we try to do good. In the psalm

where David tells about all the loveliness of creation—God riding on the clouds, the moon and stars, the streams running under the trees where the birds build, and rabbits sitting up on their hind legs looking at one from the rocks——”

“Conies, dear,” said Mrs. Thompson.

“I translate it *rabbits*,” said the girl wilfully. “I know what they look like, and if David had lived in the New World he would have said ‘rabbits.’ Rabbits scuttling away to cover are in the picture for me, and father coming home at evening from his work in the vines. David tells how God made it all just so, and the point of it is that, because it is so nearly perfect, there will come a time when sin shall be no more.”

The meandering inflection of Richarda’s voice showed that now, as usual, she was talking more to amuse herself than to please any one. And Hubert, seeing her lie helpless without other means of variety than this mental one, did not have it in his natural heart to annoy her, any more than he wished, as a usual thing, to deprive his mother-in-law of her Bible and hymns; but at that time he was worse than it was his nature to be. He felt that if he remained sitting there he should vent some savage sarcasm upon them. He rose to go, but he could not go without one word of lightly disguised contempt.

“What is sin?” he asked.

“Sin,” said Richarda dreamily. “What is it exactly, mother?”

Hubert looked to the mother, his hand on the door. He always remembered—one remembers such trifling things—that, as she essayed to answer, she gazed before

her with a look of effort and laid her hand upon the margin of her open Bible. The book was a thick one, and the worn, gilt edges of the leaves sloped in a thick brown slant to the rim of black binding. The hand she laid on it was withered, with heavy veins—a thin, trembling old hand.

“Sin,” she began, “is a coming short of the glory of God.”

Perhaps it was only a beginning. Perhaps she was going on to say much more. She stopped to adjust her words, and he, a good deal astonished at the answer, went out of the room.

“Hubert, where are you going?” cried Star.

“To my work-room,” called he.

Hubert sat on his carpenter’s bench making a box. The hymns went on downstairs, and although he shut the door and opened the window, he heard the sound faintly. Again he felt as one feels when hearing the first moaning of a storm, and he did not know why.

After about an hour Star came up the garret stair and into his low room rather disconsolately. She sat on the window-sill.

“You don’t like hymns, Hubert?”

“No, I don’t care about that sort of music; but if you do, it’s all right.”

“I didn’t care for them much to-day,” confessed Star.

She looked out from under the projecting angle of a small gable. To his vision she was set against the blue of sky and framed in the brown beams of the gable. He remembered how he had once seen her in the sun-light-flooded door by the golden green of young lilac leaves and golden red of wallflower. The colours of

this picture were sombre compared to that. The tint of sun-brown, natural to her skin, the brown red of her cheek, the wave of her chestnut hair were the same now as then, but less in hue as in light, and the setting was colder, duller. To perceive this, although vaguely, brought him toward a better mood.

“I used to like our Sunday hymns very much,” observed Star restlessly.

He was cutting a piece of wood with a knife.

“Hubert”—an unrestful pause. “Do you remember a tale—it seems to me I read one somewhere—of a girl who—she had something to do with an evil spirit in order to get her own way; and afterwards, when she went to church, she couldn’t pronounce the name of God. Do you know the tale?”

“I’ve read several like it.”

“Well, of course it’s a strong way of putting it, but I thought of it. Somehow I felt a little like that girl. I used to like to sing with mother on Sundays, but to-day I feel more at home up here with you.”

“And you wish you didn’t,” said he bluntly.

He had perfectly translated her mood. She sat, turned half sideways in the window, and watched his busy hands without dissenting.

Then in a few minutes, because she felt very restless and he did not talk, she told him all that Bramwell had said and suggested. Her account took some time. Hubert made up his mouth and whistled a little as he worked.

She turned her face again to the window. He saw her only against the blue, but she looked down on the top of a young lime tree. It was very backward for some reason, some weeks behind the season; its leaves

had not been long enough out of the curl-paper buds to have quite lost their crimp. They were not yet full-size, and hung a little limp with edge curling. Their green was light and bright and fresh. Men make green by mixing blue and yellow pigments, but this had been made by the mingled influence of sunbeam and effulgence of azure in the open above. Not blue and yellow, but light and sky, had created this pale, living green. How closely, how thickly encircling, they nestled to their dark gray twigs, those new, half-curling leaves. Above each hung the tiny red shell of the bud that had imprisoned it—red like ladybirds' wings, ready like them soon to flit away in the warm air.

A sparrow from the homely dust below had come up to the tree, and on a branch among the leaves it sat pluming its little puffy self, twisting its short neck with every movement. Gray and brown was it? All soft warm shades of bark and stone seemed to be mixed in its wings, so well set forth it was against the pale green leaves with their tips of red.

Elsewhere sunlight lay; but on this side of the house was the calm, light shadow of afternoon. Star watched the sparrow.

"Why didn't you tell me before that an operation was necessary?" asked Hubert.

She made no answer.

"I am awfully sorry for her," he said. "It must be dreadful to think one has to go through that sort of thing or be in pain all one's life. It would kill your mother," he went on. "You know the doctor said any shock would do it; and the anxiety of this——"

"Oh, you don't know mother. As long as she can

be near Richarda and know that she is comfortable, she would be glad to have it done. It wears her much more to feel that the best thing is not being done. She would like to see Richarda better before she leaves her."

"Leaves?" he said. "Oh!"

"I suppose mother can't live very long"—unsteadily. "I would like this to be done for Dicksie before she dies, if—if it were possible."

"In that case it shall be done."

"It would cost so much—fifteen pounds at the least." Star still looked at the sparrow, who seemed to have a great deal of pluming to do.

"It would cost fifty pounds," said he stubbornly; "but you surely know, Star, that I would not refuse to do anything that was needed for your family."

She looked round now. "But, Hubert, the money!"

"I told you I had a few hundreds laid away."

He had never told her just that; but it seemed to her that he must have done so.

"It is far too good of you"—she was overcome—"far too good. You work hard for every shilling; and if you have put it in the bank instead of spending it, it is not right that you should take it out for us in this way."

"I didn't work hard for every shilling of it; if I had I should not have so much. Hard work in this world earns much less than chance. I told you I had some odd ways of getting money besides my salary."

"Yes."

"Well, I don't care to talk about it because one is never sure of doing it again; but if you'll be a wise woman and not tell——"

“I won't tell.”

“Well, I made three hundred pounds some time since by designing an advertisement for a soap manufacturer. It was just a fluke. He offered a prize, and my design suited him.”

‘You are very clever.’

“I can do that sort of thing occasionally.” In a minute, “I'll speak to Bramwell myself and settle it.”

She came over to him and wound her arms round his neck and kissed his eyes and mouth. “You are good; you are good,” she said.

He looked down at her, patted her cheek lightly.

She looked up at him, into his quiet face. She hated herself for it, yet, while she was looking, the thought came, Was he good?

He seemed quite satisfied with her praise. That of itself, she felt, instinctively felt, was—not goodness.

CHAPTER VIII.

STAR could not help being surprised to observe now and then a certain secret exultation in her husband's mood concerning this money to be spent on Richarda. At moments when she would least expect it, when perhaps she least seemed to be observing him, there would be elation in the gleam of his eye and in the suppressed satisfaction of his manner. It naturally did not displease her; she was too much preoccupied to ponder upon its cause; it struck her only as passing events

strike us, which we do not remember till some after circumstance gives them significance.

Hubert never complained that during the six weeks of Richarda's illness his new-made wife was able to give him little, almost no attention. His mother-in-law grieved over it for him; she knew that he had not his rights; and Star made pretty apology by finding a minute now and then in which to condole with him on his loneliness. He behaved very well, setting himself entirely aside on the domestic scene. He contentedly occupied himself with the duties of his somewhat arduous profession, and spent his spare evenings—he could not always be at home in the evening—alone in his carpenter's attic. "Few husbands would be so unselfish, my daughter," Mrs. Thompson said to Star; and she, pleased at the praise, resolved to make it up to that unselfish husband in time to come. Now her heart was all absorbed in Richarda. Her mother, unable to help much in the sick-room, had more time for observation than she. Star hardly noticed at the time how much Hubert was left alone.

The great surgeon came and did his important work. Bramwell was with him. Bramwell had said he would come three times a day, and he kept his word. For days there was scarcely a whisper in the tiny house. Hubert crept up and down stairs with such noiseless step, his own wife, waiting at the door of the darkened room to serve the professional nurse, hardly heard him sometimes when he passed her in the narrow passage.

After a week, Star could take the nurse's place, and there was more light and more cheer in the house.

Marian came every day to inquire about the sufferer.

Each day she seemed to find reason to stay longer. She brought flowers often. She would sit with Mrs. Thompson, who was much alone and grew friendly with Marian. Sometimes Miss Gower with her own hands would perform some trifling service for Star in the house downstairs—prepare Mrs. Thompson's tea or, with inexperienced hand, dust the little parlour. She grew to feel more at home in Star's house than she had done anywhere since she left the two small rooms in which she had lived as a school teacher. Sometimes, when she came on Sunday or in the long summer evenings, she met Hubert. She began to feel for him the friendliness of custom. Oftener she met Dr. Bramwell; for she was more likely to be there at the hours of his visits than when Hubert was at home.

It was one day, almost three weeks after the operation, when Richarda's state was no longer so critical, that Star, in the new freedom of being able to leave the patient sometimes to her mother's gentle watching, came down into the little sitting-room with Dr. Bramwell to find Miss Gower waiting there.

Bramwell had turned into the sitting-room to examine a parcel from the chemist's. Star was a good deal struck with the cordiality of his greeting to Miss Gower. Cordiality was, perhaps, not precisely the word; there was a brightness, a sympathy, in the dignified mien with which he shook hands with her. He was always dignified. He never lingered long over anything he did; but he had a capacity for speaking with face and eyes in a moment of time, and to Marian his face spoke, as it did to Star, of sympathetic liking.

A young woman whose horizon has not the width which public interests and a wide grasp of life can give, is apt to notice such small things and consider them. Bramwell's manner to herself had, from the first, given Star the impression that he regarded her with a degree of admiration which, if she had not married, might easily have ripened into something more. She knew also that it was only lately that he had begun to go frequently to Mr. Gower's house. Now she observed in his manner to Miss Gower the same element which had given her some uneasiness when directed to herself. The idea fell like a seed into good soil—the soil of a mind predisposed to consider marriage the first consideration in every one's life. It occurred to her that Bramwell, having perhaps suffered more disappointment than she was aware of with regard to herself, had been in the mood to be specially attracted by Miss Gower's sweet face and gentle manner. Here was a possible love-story, one in which Star could not fail to take interest and delight.

The seed of the idea germinated and came up near the surface of her mind in one of the rare hours she could then spare to Hubert. They went out after tea for a walk on the hill.

She had felt some little surprise before this that Hubert had seemed so wholly indifferent to Bramwell's constant attendance, to his attractiveness, and to his special kindness.

Desiring to find what stuff this indifference was made of, she began with perfect directness.

“Hubert, what do you think of the doctor?”

“The ubiquitous Bramwell? I should think he was

clever enough at his trade. Why? Are you not satisfied?"

"Oh yes—in that way; but I meant about himself. Why do you call him ubiquitous?"

"I see him in all sorts of places and situations, or rather, in all sorts of benevolently pleasant situations. He is one of those people, you know, who imagine that it is heroic to run various good works, public and private, when, in reality, that is just their way of pleasing themselves."

A tinge of trouble came across Star's mind. She was beginning to realize that Hubert never trusted to unselfish motives in any one.

"You wrong him, I believe." She spoke with some heat. "I think he tries to do good for right's sake."

"If he had the choice of doing more good to some poor, dirty, old creature, or less good in a house where he meets you and your mother and Richarda (who are, if I say it who shouldn't, three very fetching women), which do you think he would choose?"

Star did not answer. Her attention was diverted from the question by perceiving that Hubert had observed that Bramwell found attraction in the house, and wondering how particular his observation had been. She was also pleased, in spite of herself, at her husband's good-natured compliment, all the sweeter to her because it embraced the three.

"It doesn't matter." Hubert relieved the silence. "Think him a hero if you will, as long as I pay him at an ordinary rate for his heroism. If he does his duty by Richarda and makes his bill honestly, that's all I care."

That evidently was all his care. Star wondered at it a little, and then tried to probe his mind on the easier subject of Miss Gower. She confessed that she had fancied she saw indications of a liking in that direction. She asked him if he thought it a possible match.

"I should think Miss Gower miles too old," said Hubert practically.

Without analyzing or criticizing either, Star instinctively held the woman she loved far superior to the man for whom she felt mere good-will. But she felt her admiration for Miss Gower was too strong to be expressed in any words that would seem rational to Hubert. She only said—

"Age doesn't matter to real love."

"If old Gower is going to leave her his money, Bramwell may fall in love—not unless, I should say."

"Oh, Hubert."

"Well."

"He would not marry for money."

"Why not?"

"It's a very wicked thing to do."

The words were spoken innocently, sincerely, before she noticed their application to her own marriage. Her own case had always seemed to her to be lifted by necessity beyond the application of law, and yet (it is a rare mind which always views its own actions in the same light) Star's heart sank now with quite new shame to perceive that she could not uphold high principle in this matter to Hubert.

She felt convinced that he saw her inconsistency, but he did not question the sentiment she had expressed, or remark upon it or look at her. He snapped the top of

some weeds with his cane as they walked up the hill by the old quarry. In a minute he suggested visiting the lamplighter's cabin. She believed that in changing the subject he had wished to save her from seeing the self-application which she had seen. He was kind, he was forbearing, he did not believe in goodness; and she, who felt vexed that he did not believe as she did, what was she that she should argue with him?

A few days, nay, a few minutes, before she had been full of enthusiasm about Hubert's unselfishness. Now she felt displeased, out of touch with him. She did not enjoy her walk, although it was the first she had had with him for weeks.

They stood together on the hillside, in the fresh summer evening. The fir wood, by which Hubert had first met Gilchrist sang them a song, not of sadness and rough weather, as it had then sung, but of warm, fragrant airs and of love. Yet it made Star sad, and that part of the hill, with its steep cliff and quarried side, seemed to her barren and unlovely. Beneath them lay the town and the plain, in the soft, purple haze which the departing day had left behind. The warmth and glow were more attractive; that part of the hill had none of them.

"Let us go down," said Star pensively.

"I brought you up to get the good air; there's no use in going down at once. If you're tired come into Montagu's place."

"No, I don't want to."

So Hubert went alone, not to see Montagu (he was down at his lamps), but to see that the cabin was all right and to leave some tea. Star stood a little way

from the door and looked in. She saw Hubert replenish the lamplighter's stock of tea.

Star came nearer and leaned against the lintel of the door, still looking in. The other cabin was shut and empty, and this one looked what it was—the abode of a half-witted creature. The whole place seemed to her weird and lonely. She felt the need of drawing nearer to her husband.

“You *are* good, Hubert,” she remarked, still somewhat moody. “You are always bringing Montagu things and looking after him.”

“I took him under my protection when I was six and he was ten. It's not likely I should give up looking after him now.”

“And Tod too,” observed Star. “You are always doing something for him now he is ill.”

“It's my way of amusing myself.”

The tone, the fact that he believed it mere amusement, grated on her. Such were the little solitudes of her married love, and yet she was (except sometimes in some pensive evening hour like this) gratefully happy, joyful in her husband's good deeds, in his kindness and cleverness.

CHAPTER IX.

IN some way the story of the infant's ghost became popular at this time. It had died down some years before Mr. Gower took the place. The new inmates of the house were the only people to take much note of it

when they heard it after arrival, but now it was talked about. Some poor neighbours of Star's got hold of and exaggerated the tale. Then it appeared in a newspaper, not the principal one of the town, on whose staff Hubert was, but a frivolous journal. The story was written out in sensational fashion. Hubert brought it home for Star to read, as he frequently brought her papers with items of interest. On this piece of writing, however, he poured great contempt. He said any fellow with a donkey's head and a pen could have made more of such a tale if he stooped to deal in such rubbish.

Star was rather proud of her husband's literary powers. Although his business was to record only terse fact, she was sure he could write very prettily if he tried.

"You could have done it much better," she said.

"Yes. If he had not exaggerated so ridiculously about the brat squalling about the neighbouring roads and fields; if he had stuck to the simple tale and told it in simple words, it would have been far more effective. You'd have everybody's hair standing on end then when they passed the place after dark; as it is, people will only laugh."

"Which will be a better result."

"A long way better; but the fellow who wrote it was no doubt trying his hand at horrors."

Star, however, had reason to suppose, from the comments of the neighbours, that the bit in the paper had more effect than Hubert had supposed possible. There was a little eeriness resting on the neighbourhood for a while. It came like a mental mist at night-fall each night thinner.

Star did not participate in this. A steady, puritan

training against believing in a fantastic supernatural had made her as invulnerable to superstition as any well-regulated human being can be. That is, perhaps, not saying much.

Certainly she was distinctly astonished a few nights afterward, when lying awake by Richarda's side, to hear two sounds like a child's cry—faint, only repeated twice. She had no doubt whatever as to the truth of her hearing, and it certainly seemed to her in the house. She listened. There was silence. She got up.

She was still nursing Richarda at night. Through the whole of the illness Hubert had insisted upon giving up his room to his mother-in-law and sleeping on an improvised bed in the attic.

Star listened now to the regular breathing in each room and then crept up the attic stair, from which the sound had seemed to proceed. It was well on in the night, and although Hubert was often out late and working late, she was surprised now to see light under his door. He had been so quiet she had thought he was asleep.

Her step, barefooted as she was, instantly brought him to the door. She had often noticed how acute his power of hearing was.

She sat down on the top step and spoke to him in whispers.

"Hubert, such an odd thing; I feel certain I heard a baby cry twice."

"Twice," he said.

"Yes, that was the oddest thing about it. They generally go straight on without any stop, but this was just like two breathings of a baby when it is crying

very hard. There was an instant's pause between—just the two and no more. It sounded as though it were in the house."

"Don't you think you have been dreaming?" There was a slightly comical raising of his features.

"I was wide awake."

"Was it the ghost?"

"Don't be absurd, dear. I am cold and sleepy. If you didn't hear anything, say so."

"Well, to tell the truth, now that you mention it, I do recollect hearing something of the sort, but I can't explain it. If you are frightened I'll look through the house."

No, she was not exactly frightened, she said. It did not seem worth troubling about. "And, Hubert dear, don't sit up. Mother says she is sure you have been working too hard lately."

He said he was just going to bed; indeed, he was in the act of taking off his coat as he spoke.

Star crept back to Richarda. So many things crowd the canvas of daily life, even of the humblest sort, that the little incident got overlaid, and she did not think to speak of it again.

Mrs. Couples came to pay her a second call. Mrs. Couples calls were of importance, for she came in a cab, was put down by the driver, pretty much as a bundle would have been taken from cab to house door. The cab waited and took her away again. This being the order of her goings in and out, she did not usually leave her own gate except on important occasions. A wedding call on Star had been one. Hubert told her the old lady would come again when there was a

baptism or a funeral. It was a distinguishing mark of the fancy she had taken to Star that she came now without such necessity.

“Mr. Tod is getting worse helpless,” said she. “Well, well—so many are ill, and some recover. Your sister’s recovering, ain’t she, poor dear? but Mr. Tod’s getting worse helpless.”

The contrast suggested enlisted the warm sympathy of Star and Mrs. Thompson both for Tod and his landlady. Mrs. Couples did not seem to feel now that Tod was a burden to her, although he could no longer pay his rent, and there was no immediate prospect of his leaving his bed. She turned from the subject of his case cheerfully when she had stated it, having commiserated him, not herself.

She was, indeed, a kind creature, and, what was as much in her vocation, an enthusiastic cook. She twitted Star now on Hubert’s praise of his wife.

“Yes, well, but Mr. Kent’s brought you to a nice little house, and he says—yes, he does say you’re smart at keeping it tidy; and as to coffee, he says mine doesn’t come up to it. He did, my dear, and I make about the best coffee *I* ever tasted, for I often say I’m a cook, if I’m anything; having to sit, you know, to watch and stir things on the fire, I never let them be a hair too much or too little done. I say to the slavey, ‘Bring this,’ and ‘Bring that,’ but I sit and stir and move the pots about. Warm?—yes, dear, that’s true, it is; but I wear something airy, like a cotton gown. Yes, he did say your coffee was better, yes. I wasn’t offended—oh dear, no—offended, no; no, dear, no.” Her negatives merged themselves into the next subject which came up.

It was clear that Tod would lack neither care nor nourishment while he remained with her, but it became an interesting question to Kent's household how long Mrs. Couples could afford to keep him. The illness, which had begun by some foolish exposure of himself on a cold, wet day, had ended in serious affection of the heart. Hubert, who went in frequently to give him a word of cheer, seemed to despair of such friends as Tod possessed doing much for him. Yet perhaps it was partly from curiosity, as well as from benevolence, that he urged Star to ask Miss Gower what degree of acquaintance she had with him.

Star put her question with tact, and, on the whole, Marian told the truth willingly enough, and in few words.

"How odd!" cried Richarda. The incident did not strike them as having any pathos in it, or much meaning of any sort. "Circumstances are so inconsequent!" This was an habitual complaint of Richarda's; she loved a good tale. "I don't like things that have no sustained bearing on anything. If you think of our lives as being all planned and working out in a perfect pattern, what are you to make of an episode like this? Is it a knot, a flaw, a mistake, a dash of colour with no repetition to complete the pattern? or somewhere, in some other star, will Tod cross Miss Gower's path again, and the sense of things be indicated?"

"You might as well ask the same about every person to whom we speak in the most casual way," replied Marian.

She was glad to see Richarda again strong enough to chat, glad that the theme thus chanced upon amused

her. Yet the idea Richarda had suggested was not pleasant.

As she walked home she mused idly, but her musings were wilful, not what she could have wished. Nowadays Charles Bramwell often found occasion to chat with her, and she had accepted his frank friendship. But possibly there was to be no sequence to this episode either. "All the world isn't a stage, for if it were, the players would do something more interesting," Richarda had said.

CHAPTER X.

A FEW days after, Dr. Bramwell came in on his return from an early morning call on Mr. Gower. He looked excited.

"They have had a burglary up there," he said; "three hundred and seventy pounds in bank-notes gone."

Star exclaimed.

"Do you remember, Mrs. Kent, you and I first made acquaintance over a burglary?"

She remembered they had made acquaintance over something which annoyed her much more, but she admitted his assertion.

"Well, unaccountable and extraordinary as that one was, this matches it. I'm inclined to think it the more remarkable of the two."

He went on to give a brief account. About nine in the evening, just after the night had closed in dark, some one in the house had heard a child cry in or near

the laurels at the side of the house. First one had gone out, and then another, till at last all the household were gathered there; even Mr. Gower himself insisted on hobbling out. They heard the child continue crying for a considerable length of time. When they went in again, some one had been in Mr. Gower's dressing-room and taken the money.

"And they never found the infant?" cried Star, shocked.

"Upon my word, I don't think there could have been a child there," he returned. "I can't make anything out of it. Half a dozen people, you know, must have found it if it had been there. But the hopeless thing," he went on—he was young and excited; he would have talked to any one who evinced interest—"the hopeless feature of it is, that half the men in town knew the money was in the house last night, so the fact of the thief knowing is no clue to him. It's been rather a scandal, and I would not care for Miss Gower to hear of it. It seems this old Colonel Parker, who has been living there, had been gaming with Gower, and owed him this money for some weeks past, and Gower would neither take promise nor cheque—at least, that's the tale circulated—and he has been borrowing money to get it paid. He had just collected it, and went away yesterday."

"They are not a very honourable pair," observed Star.

Star just then heard her husband's unexpected step at the door. He had gone to town as usual, a couple of hours before. He too had come with tidings of the theft. He was on his way to interview Mr. Gower if

possible; if not, the servants, in the ordinary exercise of his profession. He came in only for a moment in passing to say what his errand was and advise Star to go and see Miss Gower.

"She may want you," he said; "she's been uncommonly kind to us."

"I will come with you."

"No"—he pushed her gently back—"no; I am going on business, my dear; newspaper men are sometimes hustled about in fine houses. You can come alone."

Star ran for her hat. All her wifely loyalty was roused. If he had to be treated with incivility, she would stand by his side. But when she was ready, he was gone far along the road, and, although she walked fast, he gained in distance.

When she entered the house and asked for Miss Gower, the servant led her past a room in which she saw her husband through the open door. He stood in the plain working suit of iron-gray tweed in which she had first seen him. His hat was placed on the floor beside him with some papers in it, and, with note-book and pencil in hand, he was interrogating some one. Star slackened her pace; beyond Hubert she saw the luxurious trappings of the room and Mr. Gower seated, excited, restless, white-faced, with rims of red round his dull eyes.

"You have not the number of any of the notes?"

"I tell you I have not, nor has Colonel Parker."

"He wired you this morning to that effect?"

"Of course the men he sharked up the money from may or may not have taken the numbers."

"That's the first thing to find out," said Hubert.

As she went on she heard their voices in subdued alternation—calm, concise question, irritable reply.

Marian was in an upper sitting-room. She received Star with suppressed excitement of manner. She was glad to see any one she could talk to.

“What have you heard?” she asked. “I hardly know what to think, I am so perplexed. I have had a presentiment something would happen. I felt convinced of it. Who told you?”

“Dr. Bramwell.”

“Oh, we had to send for him, uncle was made so ill; he came in early when the detective was here. Gilchrist telegraphed for a detective last night as soon as he found the money gone.”

“Then of course he had nothing to do with it. I think he has an honest face.”

“I do not wish to suspect any one unjustly, even in thought.”

“But you do suspect him?”

Marian gave a hasty glance round, as if she were afraid of her environs. “I have always suspected him more or less, yet I do not know that I have any reason. No one else suspects him, and I shall not suggest it. If he is guilty he certainly has managed not to appear to be.”

“Was he outside when you thought you heard——”

“Oh, don’t speak of it.” She covered her face with her hands. “I don’t know whether to laugh or shudder when I think of it; it seems absurd or horrible, I don’t know which.”

“But what happened? Tell me.”

“It was a most unnatural cry. The servants all

declare that it was exactly like an infant's voice, and certainly it was more like that than anything else; but it sounded to me most unnatural, as if the child were being frightened to death or something. It went on and on, in an even, intolerable way, and then it grew hoarser, and suddenly it seemed to choke; we heard it choking for a few seconds, then it stopped."

"How shocking! But where was it?"

"We could not find anything; we had three stable lanterns."

"But I mean where and how did you hear it?"

"One of the maids heard it first. It seemed, although I did not know it, that she was in the habit of meeting her lover in the yew arch, beyond the laurels, and he was frightened away by this crying. She came in too frightened not to tell about it. Then the others went to listen, and they told Gilchrist; he was with uncle. I had gone out before he came, and when the boy went for him and he came up and heard it, I must say I think he thought it was a real child at first; he called out to see if any one would answer, and then, so promptly, sent for the stable lanterns and began looking under the laurels in a business-like way. We were all standing at the corner of the house that is nearest my window."

"But you must have been able to tell where the sound was."

"You have no idea how hard it is to tell where a sound is; I never had before last night. Sometimes it seemed to me to come from the house wall behind the tops of the trees just above where one could reach, and at other times to come from the ground in the middle of the laurels."

“And you are sure no one was there?”

“Yes, I think we may say we are quite sure. The groom brought three lanterns and some candle-ends. Gilchrist went at once through the hedge with one of the lanterns. You know there is a hedge round the laurels which block up his window, which is under mine.”

“That is just about the place where you heard the child last time. We thought it might have been that beggar’s child. Do you think that now?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

There was a moment’s pause. Miss Gower continued inconsequently. “Do you know, one of the things that struck me most was the expression of that man’s face when the lantern was first lit and he was just going to push through the hedge. I saw the light glare suddenly on his face. It was almost beautiful, yet almost haggard with anxiety. It reminded me of pictures of martyrs.”

“The man is such a commonplace man,” objected Star, wondering; “a little fat, a little sad-looking, perhaps.”

“I only tell you what I saw.”

“Well?”

“Well, he went right through the hedge; he got badly scratched. In a minute he said, in rather a tone of relief, that no one was there. The groom got in where the hedge was thin against the wall. They both had lights, and they looked about to be sure. We could see under the bushes through gaps in the hedge. There was really no one there. Then they looked in the yew arch and on the lawn under all the trees and in the empty

glass-houses. We can't be positive there was no one about. There was a slight wind, and the candle-ends blew out sometimes. The maids kept lighting matches, and, what with the glaring lights making the darkness far darker and two of the girls crying, we could neither see nor hear very distinctly. I think if we had had no light we might have done better; it was not perfectly dark."

"Was it Gilchrist who looked in the other places as well?"

"No; when he was in the launty we heard uncle's bell ringing furiously. He was offended at being left alone; Gilchrist had to go to him. Then he insisted on coming out, so of course Gilchrist had to help him and stand with him. All the other servants trooped round that part of the place. The grooms were very energetic. I think if any one had been there they would have been seen."

"And all the time the whole house was left exposed for any one to ransack."

"Yes; the doors and windows were all open; it was so warm, and we are so far from the road; besides, when we came out we didn't intend to stay a minute."

"The whole thing was a hoax, to distract your attention."

"But how was it done? Gilchrist says he does not think any ventriloquist could have kept it up so long. Besides, they say such illusions are always greatly helped by the way the man has of appearing to look at the place the voice is supposed to come from."

"And in this case," said Star, "at least eight people, for about half an hour, felt convinced that there was a

real child crying in a place where no child was. Tell me one thing, Miss Gower—do you think it was a ghost?”

“No, I do not think so. It did not sound to me the least spiritual. But what can one say? All the servants think that, you know. Three have given warning.”

“What does your uncle think?”

“I can't tell. He swore horribly when he was listening last night, especially when it seemed to choke and stop. I think he was frightened. I really think he was more annoyed by hearing that than by his losses.”

“How was it that the money was so easily found?”

“Oh, the burglar opened everything. It seems”—Marian sighed—“my uncle had got it from Colonel Parker for a gambling debt. I never knew before that he gambled. I sometimes think he has every vice and no virtue; and he is my uncle.” Marian wept. “I have tried to influence him; indeed, I have. I came to him hoping so much from my own influence, and I have done nothing. I am quite in despair. I *can* do nothing.”

Star did not know what comfort to give. They went back to the interesting theme.

“Mr. Gower's rooms are quite at the other side of the house?”

“Yes; quite.”

Star had a thought; she asked if Colonel Parker could have returned and taken his own money again. But Marian could not bring herself to believe that of a man who had sat at their dinner-table so long.

“It doesn't seem to me that it's a bit worse than

gambling to that extent—paying away money that he had to borrow to give. I had as lief steal as either lose or win money like that.” Star spoke hotly.

“You think my uncle is as bad as a thief, then?”

“I was speaking of Colonel Parker.”

“But you said, ‘to lose or win.’” Her voice trembled a little.

“It isn’t my business to judge.”

“I am very unhappy,” said Marian. “I feel this morning as if it were a very wicked world.”

“When one feels that way I suppose one ought to try to make it better.”

“What can I do? Such efforts surely begin at home, and my uncle—I have not half so much influence over him as his servant has.”

They had come back to the place for Marian’s tears. This morning they flowed freely.

CHAPTER XI.

“It is just as I suspected,” said Hubert, after he had come in from his day’s work that evening. “All these fellows between them have only the numbers of four of the notes, and they are not sure of one of these. It seems that half a dozen of the men at the club lent it to Parker because he trumped up the story that old Gower was treating him shamefully in threatening to sue him for another debt if he left the house without paying this.”

“Do you suppose that Mr. Gower really pressed him for it?”

“I don't know, I'm sure.”

“Do you think Colonel Parker could have stolen or paid some one to steal the money back again?”

“Parker went to London last night. Oh no; these fellows, like all moralists, draw the most absurd line between right and wrong. The colonel will borrow and never pay; game away his own money, and live on his relations; cause all sorts of misery to men and women wherever he goes; but I've no doubt he's too virtuous to steal. That would hurt his conscience and make him uncomfortable.”

There was a sneer in Hubert's tone, which Star winced at a little. His words came too readily, as though some excitement made him glib. It was not very noticeable. He did not raise his voice, or say too much. No doubt he was merely excited by reporting such a mysterious affair.

He was speaking to her then in the kitchen whence, in a minute, he helped her carry his own tea into the little parlour. He was rather late, and their meal was finished, so he ate alone. The lamp was on the table, with a pink shade on it, which Star had just made out of some bits of a pink silk frock that dated from better days. Hubert was called upon to admire it before he might eat.

“The old rags look remarkably well,” he said.

“I ironed them; covered with lace, it does not show that they are old. The light comes so softly through.”

“You might have bought a bit of new if you had wanted,” he said.

“No, I might not; you are far too extravagant. Besides, I like this better; I was very happy wearing that frock before father died. I like it here; it seems to piece things on. It is sad to live among everything new.”

Richarda was with them again. She could walk now with a crutch.

When Hubert began to take his tea, with the soft pink light glowing on him and his dishes, Richarda began—

“Well, Hubert, is this new burglary the work of your genius?”

“How—my genius!” He had laid down his knife very composedly, and looked at her a little surprised.

“Yes. You know you said the man who did the other with his dog was a genius. Do you perceive his track again here?”

“Oh”—he took up his knife again—“did I say he was a genius?”

“Yes. Do you think this was the same man?”

“I’ve put most of my ideas on paper,” he said. “There are two columns of them here.” He handed her the newspaper. “My dear,” he said, “I think I should like a little more sugar.”

He did not often use terms of endearment in ordinary conversation. Star smiled as she took the cup. She put the tongs in the sugar-basin with the other hand, and made him just wait a moment coquettishly while she smiled at him round the lamp.

“Do you think you deserve another lump?” she asked, arching her eyebrows. Her smile was like a pink rosebud in the lamp’s soft light.

“Certainly,” he answered with audacity. He smiled back at her, and his clear gray eyes gave her a glance more emotional, more suggestive of love of pleasure in his love of her, than she had yet seen.

She gave back the cup. For some moments the quiet sounds of his knife and fork, the click of the mother’s knitting-needles, the rustle of Richarda’s paper, filled the room. The voices of children at play on the road gave only a setting of cheerful neighbourhood to the little room, with its pink light and happy inmates. Star, looking at her lampshade with the loving eye of an artist towards his creation, felt consciously, supremely blessed. Her home, her dear ones! She looked round the room in this sudden flush of conscious feeling that had come up and over the surface of her mind, but after an instant observed, like a true house-wife, that the teapot wanted replenishing. She took it up, yet waited in easy attitude, holding it in her hand to hear something Richarda began to say.

“You make very little indeed of the best part of the tale. You say, ‘They thought they heard an infant wailing.’ Miss Gower told Star a much better story than that.”

“What was it?” He looked up at his young wife.

“Oh, she said it went on crying for about twenty minutes in a hard, even, unendurable way, which struck her as most unnatural; but at last they heard it grow hoarse, and then it actually choked, she said. She heard it quite distinctly, as if there were a gurgle in its throat; then it stopped.”

Hubert burst out laughing. He did not usually laugh aloud, but this laugh seemed to well up from

within him and overflow in a long chuckle of irresistible amusement.

“It is funny,” said Richarda, “seeing there was not a real child to be found. But it sounds horrible too.”

Star bore off her teapot to go to the kettle at the kitchen fire. She went lightly out of the little room, as human beings go so often on practical errands without particular thought of anything uppermost in the mind. A half mechanical intention of what is to be done, a general contentment with the world—that is all.

It is probable, if we but knew it, that the region of our thought is like the ocean, of which the surface only is our consciousness, while currents work their silent way underneath, producing only at times some change upon the surface.

It was but a step past the foot of the stair, through the narrow entry, to the kitchen door. The entry was only lit by the July twilight. The kitchen gas was turned low. Star went with the teapot, and, as she went, a thought struck her—

It was Hubert who had committed this theft—this and that other!

She did not know how she knew; probably a thousand tiny circumstances had been informing her quick mind and quicker sympathies for months. They were all summed up now in a flash of the truth.

She stood stunned a moment at the threshold of the tidy little kitchen. Its low light, its quiet hues of bare wood and stone, seemed to receive her secret from her and become instinct with it. She stumbled forward, not to do her errand, but to sit by the deal table, to put her elbow on it and lean her head on her hand.

The little kitchen clock ticked, ticked, ticked.

In about five minutes Hubert came. "Star!" he called. He came to the door. "What's the matter?" He came over beside her. "What's the matter? Are you ill?"

"I—yes, I feel ill." She did not take her hand from before her eyes.

He stooped a little. "Are you in any pain? Tell me."

He stood in a helpless way, as men are apt to do before illness. He was not usually caressing in his manner; it did not occur to him to touch her.

She said at last, "I am a little faint. I think I shall be better——"

She was going to say "soon," but the word appalled her with a question of its truth. Better when? What betterness could there be for her? She did not think; she only dimly felt the thought.

He went back to the parlour.

"Mother," he said—he had chosen of his own accord to call Star's mother by that name on occasions; this was one of them—"Star says she feels faint; will you come and see her?"

He gave the feeble step the support of his arm. Star moved her hand for the first time to see them enter the door thus. The bare kitchen floor reeled as she looked. Then she knew that she really was feeling ill.

They came and spoke wisely and kindly. She had better go to bed. Was there anything that she could take?

She roused herself. Yes, she would go up and lie down on the bed. She had put the teapot carelessly near the edge of the table: she pushed it back mechanically

and went to escape from them. Hubert followed upstairs. He carefully covered her up on the bed.

“What is it you feel?” he asked.

“Only leave me alone,” she said.

So he left her, shutting the door.

What seemed her most acute distress at that moment was the knowledge that he would soon come back to see how she was. Or her mother would come creeping in tenderly, strong with the strength of passionate mother love, to wait on the child who had so long waited on her. Or Richarda would come, with her newly found power of walking with a crutch, proud to display her power, making her little jokes and odd quaint sayings serve as familiar expression of sister love. They would come, one or all; they would open the door again soon. She did not think; she realized nothing, nothing but that she was in some misery. She moved on the bed; she put her arms up under her head; she opened her eyes, straining them to look in the dark.

She saw nothing, only visions of the old happy home among the Californian vineyards. She seemed to remember that she had seen some other happy scene since then. She remembered the room downstairs. She went back again then, with aching brain, to the other scene. “Oh mother!” she whispered; “Oh my sister!” “Oh father, father!” The sound of her own voice just breathing on the air seemed to comfort her; it was something to listen to, to observe in the darkness. “Oh father, father!” she whispered again. She seemed to play with her own whispers, as with a harmless toy, for a little. “Father, father!” Then remembering herself, she groaned, “Oh God!”

Her mother and Richarda did both soon come. For their sakes she undressed herself and crept into the bed. They came to the conclusion that she had had some little quarrel with Hubert. They would not question her much. Her mother left her with fervent kisses. She promised them to be well in the morning. She knew she must keep the promise. She believed by this time that in fact she was quite well, though she shammed illness, and hated herself for it.

She heard them go to bed in their own room, next to hers.

She lay there, only dreading one thing—that Hubert should come and question her again. She felt wretched only because she knew he would come. She thought if it had not been for that she could have settled her mind to think. Perhaps, if she could think it all out, it would not seem so strange, so sad, so bad, that Hubert should be a thief.

He did not come for a long time. At length she heard his step. She had often noticed how quiet he could be—was the word stealthy, not quiet?

He came and stood beside her. She did not feign sleep. Then he turned up the light deliberately, and brought a chair so that he could sit down, his face looking into hers.

“Now,” he said, “what is the matter?”

He spoke quite quietly, but she thought that he suspected her suspicion. When she looked at his familiar face a great hope came over her for the first time that she was mistaken.

She glanced at the door. He had shut and locked it.

“Hubert, did *you* steal Mr. Gower’s money?”

“Yes.”

He said it so quietly. She felt that his quiet kept her from being excessively shocked.

“And that other, too—the money the mayor had to give the almshouses?”

“Yes.”

“You are a burglar?”

“Yes.”

She looked at him. She wondered that she did not faint or scream or—die. She did not feel in the least like any such demonstration or change. His calm calmed her. The wonder seemed to be, not that he had said ‘yes,’ but that the room, and they two in it, seemed so familiar, quiet and cosy. She turned her head from him wearily on the pillow.

“How did you find out?”

“I just thought of it; then I knew.”

“Nothing special made you guess?”

“No.”

“Well, I always intended you to know some time. There is no use in having a secret from you. You are my wife, you know.”

“You meant me to know?” There was some faint surprise in her voice now.

“Yes. When I advertised, you know——” He stopped.

“Well?” She was interested in spite of herself.

“I didn’t intend to marry a wife I could not tell. I meant at first that she should help me, but I shouldn’t want you to do that. However, I don’t mind you knowing. When you’ve thought it over it won’t seem so bad as it does now.”

“Why not?” she asked, almost as a child would.

“Because there are many mitigating circumstances. I have my principles, and keep to them, although they are not the same as people ordinarily have.”

“I like ordinary principles best.” She felt that she was speaking childishly.

“The men from whom I have taken money made it abominably. Mr. Allan, the mayor, made his by sweating; coined it out of the wretchedness of men and women; did it deliberately too, knowing all about his own trade. *He* got it by insolently grinding down people by the power his father’s trade happened to leave in his hand; *I* got it from him—by skill that was the outcome of weeks of thought. He used it only for his own pleasure; I did good with it. Am I worse than he? I hold myself better. This Gower made his money by being an idle partner in an Indian house that grew rich by cheating the natives and trading on their ignorance. How he got this special sum you know; and he would have used it gaming with the next dissipated wretch who visited him. Isn’t it doing better service paying Richarda’s doctor’s bill?”

She had no answer.

“Why did you marry me, Hubert?” she asked very wearily.

“I liked you. I was glad to do what you asked for them. I wanted to get married mostly for the respectable look of the thing, and of course they add to that. Besides,” half shyly, “I liked you, Star, you know.”

She felt astonished that he should add that last remark. It surely could not be true. Cool, calculating self-interest and love could not blend this way. She

knew his shy, "I liked you, Star," was equivalent to another man's, "I loved."

Yes, and she perceived that he would have leaned down and kissed her in another minute.

"I think we will not talk any more to-night," she said; "I feel very tired."

She did turn to him, however, while he was preparing for bed.

"Does any one help you, Hubert?"

"No."

"Does any other person in the world know?"

"No; only you and I; and we are one, you know."

CHAPTER XII.

IT is difficult for any one young and healthy to lie the whole night long in darkness and silence without sleep, however great be the sorrow.

For an hour, perhaps for three or four, Star lay still, wrapped in the endeavour to conform her thoughts to the reality of her husband's crime. It still seemed to lie upon the confines of her mind, as a hideous spectacle before which all her natural and ordinary ideas stood stunned and affrighted. Yet there was nothing she knew more clearly than this, that this ghastly thing, at which they stared, must be taken in to live with these other ideas, must become an intimate part of her life. She could not fly from it; she must decide how she would deal with it.

Could she not fly from him, from Hubert?—rise up in the darkness, there and then, and take her mother and sister, and run far and swiftly anywhere where darkness and distance should divide her and her loved ones from the thief who now was peacefully sleeping by her side? This was the first cry of her heart. It came to relieve her, like those wild, sweet notions which serve as walls for the air castles of youth—walls which need not stand the test of the measuring rule and plummet of possibility. But no air castle could serve her purpose now. To leave him then and there was impossible. Could she ever leave him?

The question of ever or never did not confront her now with much urgency. Had she been a woman of higher ideality she might have exhausted herself that night in the attempt to map out her whole future on lines of heroic suffering and passionate protest. Star was concerned first and most with the immediate present. Her mother, to whom a very slight shock or change might be death, who could not under any circumstances live long, had found a home of peace in Hubert's protection. Richarda, who, just recovering from the serious operation, had been told by the doctors that for a year at least to attempt any employment would be to destroy her hope of recovery, had now the care and comfort she needed in Hubert's house; not only that, but she owed to him the measure of health she now had, and all her hope of health. Star thought of them—of one and of the other. How could she, Hubert's wife, rise up in the strength of her injured innocence and tell him that she would have neither part nor lot in his dishonest career? If to-morrow they all three went out of his door in absolute poverty, and she

with the disgrace upon her which must always attend the separation of married couples, what would come next?

She supposed she could force him to let her go. She had an indistinct idea that legally her testimony would not avail against her husband, even if she had had evidence beyond his own confession, but she knew that she had it in her power to disgrace him by speaking; she knew also that he would not brook disgrace—his reputation, if not his pet delight, was at least his stock-in-trade. For some time she wondered how she could use this power over him without any compunction as to his suffering. Then she remembered how easily, how lightly, he had trusted her with his secret. She listened to his light breathing as he slept, and twisted the wedding ring on her finger. If she did buy her liberty at the price of her silence and go out from his house, with her mother and sister, to face utmost poverty rather than share his gains, could she challenge God to her aid? would she leave no duty behind her undone?

And as she thought, and tried to think more clearly, sleep came upon her. She never thought of sleep, but it stole her senses unawares, and when she next knew herself the sun was streaming in with all its morning brightness, and she knew, by the place of its beams in the room, that her little day was beginning too late.

“Star,”—Hubert stood at the door apparently intent only upon thoughts of breakfast—“I have lit the fire and got the water boiling; I can make some breakfast if you’ll tell me where to find the things.”

This was the first time in that little toy house of theirs that she had failed to get his breakfast.

She started in all the pretty importance and bustle of

a belated young housekeeper. Poor girl, a stray sun-beam was upon her tumbled hair when she remembered the preceding night and, in the midst of her happy haste, stopped to look at him with piteous eyes.

He knew as well as she did what had arrested her; he only said—

“Don’t get up if you are tired. Tell me where the things are and what to do.”

He spoke with all the cheerfulness of the commonplace in his air and words, and after the nightmare of the thoughts which had come before sleep, this plan his air suggested, which she had not before thought of, of going on for at least one day more as if nothing had happened, came to her as an inexpressible relief. Then, too, she must hasten all she did until he was gone. The relief of work—work that must be done in haste, that left not a moment’s time to consider—was like shelter from a storm. After that one piteous glance she gave him, he had no other from her. It was not long before he had his breakfast and was ready to go. She did not eat hers with him, but she had tea to take upstairs; that was an excuse. He came before he went out to the kitchen, and found her there, busy with her fire and her cookery. He spoke with more than usual affection.

“Good-bye; and, look here, you mustn’t worry about anything, you know. I can explain everything to you that you want to know when I come to-night.”

He went away lighthearted. She felt quite certain that his lightheartedness was no pretence. He trusted her as absolutely as he trusted himself. He had no fear of anything. It was not his nature to disturb himself with fears. He was at ease.

She sat down in her disordered kitchen, for the first time in her life content to sit in the midst of confusion without the least effort toward cleanliness and order. Hubert's breakfast-table in the other room was left uncleared; in this, except that he himself had made the fire tidily, everything had been laid down where it had been used. She had taken satisfaction in working carelessly that she might be compelled to work the longer in rearranging her small domain. It had not occurred to her that she could leave work undone till she heard his receding footstep and sat down to listen to it and return to her undisturbed thoughts, as even a diligent person may wilfully take time from duty to peruse a tale which has cast a spell. She could hear Richarda talking with her mother over their breakfast-tray in the room above. The street door was open, as it often stood while she worked about from room to room; she could hear the play of the children, the noise of passing carts. At the kitchen window sounds entered of birds in her own yard, and neighbours chattering in theirs. The summer day had opened cheerfully upon the suburban interests of the place.

In a little while she took her purse from her pocket and opened it. It was Friday, and there were some odd shillings and pence over from the pound that Hubert gave her weekly for current expenses. There was also, in the small middle compartment, a sovereign which, at the beginning of their housekeeping, he had put in there, telling her to keep it in case of an emergency. She remembered exactly how he looked when his neat, deft fingers had shut this small compartment; how, at this time and at others, she had taken his practical, considerate kindness in place of the caressing humour she had

expected as proof of love. She had told herself often that the real thought he had displayed in kindnesses, especially to her mother, far more than compensated for the lack of tenderness which had sometimes piqued her. She *had* learned to realize that this was Hubert's way of love; *now* her heart complained bitterly that there had been nothing in it but cleverest self-interest.

In taking out the purse she had no idea of calculating the value of her store with thought of using it for flight. The idea of flight had passed with the vapours of night. Her impulse was to look with curiosity upon money that had been stolen, and for this purpose she pushed aside the coins she had received in change, and held the sovereign in her palm. Was it one of that three hundred which the old mayor had had ready to give to the poor in pursuance of the strange bequest? It could not have been taken from Mr. Gower's pocket, for she had had it a long time, and that last theft only occurred two days before. Was it two, only two, days before? Time, circumstances, seemed confused. But perhaps she was destined to spend Mr. Gower's money, as she had, no doubt, been steadily spending the gold the mayor had been obliged to make good—she, Esther Thompson, who had been so quietly and well brought up. It was very strange!

That was the main tenor of her thought—that it was very strange. She had supposed all crime to belong to a sphere of life wholly apart from domestic peace. To reconcile her experience and belief, she tried to suppose all Hubert's homely ways a mere farce and blind for a real life he lived elsewhere. Yet her imagination failed to serve her in considering where and what that other life might be

So she sat baffled, wondering if she could arrange with him and her little public to leave him and take back her mother and Richarda to that poverty whence he had rescued them. She could not realize the full sadness of her situation. She was not accustomed to analyze thought or circumstance. To such a mind time only can bring full realization.

There was a tap at an outer door, a light, strong step in the entry, a slight hesitation in its walk, and then, a pace within the door of the untidy kitchen, stood Charles Bramwell.

“Oh, Dr. Bramwell!” cried Star. She rose suddenly with the vague impression that she had much to tell any friend whom she saw. Then instantly she perceived that she had nothing to tell—that all that had happened to change her life and reverse her whole thought of life must never be told to him or any other friend. In that moment, in which she felt herself grow wise as though with age, she stood in untidy dress, which was wholly unusual to her, in the midst of a clutter of pots and dishes. She looked pale and ill; she was evidently rendered speechless by some occasion of dismay. He looked at her, at the purse and money which lay on the table by her. He was young, and his sympathetic kindness was as undisciplined as it was strong. He strode across the bare floor to her side with an expression of concern.

“You are ill, Mrs. Kent. Has anything happened? Mrs. Thompson is not——” He knew well the calamity most likely to befall; his thoughts jumped to the conclusion that Mrs. Thompson was dying or dead. “Why did you not send for me?” he asked, in a graver tone of

kindest reproach. "This was surely not treating me as a friend?"

Believing her to be suffering from the greatest grief a loving daughter can have, he took her hand to lead her from a place so evidently unsuitable.

"Come into the front room with me," he said with gentle authority.

Seeing that she was trembling and faint, he passed his arm round her waist to bring her to the sofa in the front room, and Star, her brain reeling with physical faintness, raised her troubled eyes to his and felt, for one short moment, what it was to rest on the strength of a man who was as honest as he was strong. She could not reason about character as many can; she knew, with unerring instinct, that this doctor's young blue eyes had always told her of an honest heart, just as she knew that she had never been able to fathom the look of her husband's eyes.

"I think I am fainting," she said in tones of astonishment. She sat down again.

He gave her water; he entreated her to tell him of Mrs. Thompson: and Star, drinking the water, began to deride herself to him, as her native wit taught her was the best form of concealment.

"It's a fuss about nothing," she cried. "I only felt faint for a minute. I have, it is true, been anxious about mother for a day or two. She is eating nothing; but I hope that when she sees you she will be better again.'

His manner grew more composed the moment he found that the worst he had assumed was not realized.

"Can you not get some one to do this work for

you?" He glanced at the disorder. "You are not fit. I am sure if Mr. Kent were here he would agree with me."

He always spoke of Hubert with that guarded respect which made Star aware that he remembered each time that he was below him in station. His manner, which grew more friendly to the rest of them, became formal when he took Hubert's name on his lips. It came to her like some distant mental echo that in the past, all the past up to a few hours ago, she had resented this with the unreasonable resentment which such circumstances are apt to raise; now—

He never knew, he never guessed, how to-day her heart ached under the habitual little air of pride which she put on in speaking of Hubert.

"My husband is always anxious that I should have help. It is my own choice to do the work."

Then, for appearance sake, she promised to have help that day. He turned at once to go to her mother's room, and she begged him, with apparent interest, to shut his eyes to disorder.

When he came down again she was already at the door, bargaining with a neighbour to come in for half a day. The neighbour drew into her house, as a snail into a shell, when the doctor appeared, probably from an awkward consciousness of dirt and curlpapers.

"There are advantages," said Star archly, "in living but one door removed from a charwoman."

Hubert had estimated his wife perfectly when he chose her to share his secret. Except in one moment of surprise and physical faintness, she did not feel the slightest temptation to betray her husband. She was so

intent now on wiping away from Bramwell's mind the recollection of her obvious distress, that she had forgotten, for once, that tremor of apprehension that his errand to her mother's room usually caused her. It was as well for her purpose of concealment that he took for granted the tremor was there. Her gaiety was too evidently forced.

"You have been more anxious about Mrs. Thompson than you would own." He spoke with real concern. "You have reason, I regret to say."

Star put both hands behind her and leaned against the lintel of the door. It seemed to her at the moment that she must clear away all between her eyes and his inmost thought that she might read it through and through. She did read that thought with large startled gaze; it said to her, though his lips did not move, "Your mother will die soon." All other interest, even the newest and saddest her life had developed, faded from her; only this one thought filled her—the mother's smile, the mother's love, that was the light of her life, was to be taken away from her.

"How soon?" Her lips formed the words as she looked at him.

"Oh, I hope it may not be for many days yet. I only know that—that it cannot be long now."

Bramwell was truly concerned. He had a warm regard for Mrs. Thompson. It was he who spoke unavailing words of regret as they stood there, not she. There was at least this relief in her sorrow, that she need not dissemble any more. It calmed her to feel that she might be sad now if she chose without any curious questions.

CHAPTER XIII.

THERE was not much to be done for Mrs. Thompson that had not been done daily for a long time. She was not much more ill than she had been in the preceding weeks, except that the heart, like a delicate instrument, was beating with less strength; and they all knew, for Bramwell had made no concealment of the fact to any of them, that its strength would be less and less. Star let her neighbour work her awkward, slovenly will with the household treasures, and sat through most of the hours of the day passively holding the dear withered hand in her own, seeming to care neither for speech nor movement.

“You are not like yourself, love,” the mother said. “Why should you be so distressed to-day? We have known a long time that I must leave you soon.” She went on, in her gentle, thoughtful way, to speak of their affairs—how grateful she felt to Hubert for defraying the expenses of Richarda’s illness; how thankful she was that Divine Providence had permitted her to see her child, so long a cripple, in a fair way to recover the use of her natural powers. “And, Star,” she said, “although I was greatly averse to your marriage, and although it has been a hard trial to my faith to see you married to a man who makes no profession of religion, yet I have been brought to see that we may judge too hastily on external grounds, and I can die and leave you in his care, my darling, with more security than I could

have believed possible. It is not for us to judge, yet it seems to me that a young man so unselfish, so upright, cannot be far from the kingdom of God."

Star sat with averted face.

"Nor do I feel distressed," the quiet voice went on, "to leave Richarda to you and him. In a year or two now she will be able to do something to support herself. If Hubert had been less kind the thought of that time of dependence must have troubled us; but, dear, we have much to be thankful for. Hubert has shown himself very, very kind."

She could not speak very continuously, but all that day, when she did speak, it was in the same strain, the strain of quiet thankfulness and submission of her own theories and judgment to the higher knowledge and mercy of God. "His ways are very mysterious to us sometimes," she said, harping with gentle repetition on the theme which most possessed her mind. "He teaches us by experience that He can bring the greatest blessing out of what seems the greatest trouble. I felt, dear, that trouble could not be greater when your father died; and afterwards, when I thought that I must die, leaving you both strangers and penniless in a strange land, that seemed worse; yet your marriage with a man whom we knew so little seemed to me worse than all. If you had not felt so sure that you were providentially led to it, I *could* not have yielded as I did. Now I have been taught that God's ways are higher than mine. I am sure, dear, that He has a plan for your life—a plan for greater usefulness and blessing than I could have devised. I can die happily, and leave you and Richarda and Hubert in your heavenly Father's care."

Star was silent and listened to it all.

When evening approached the mother smiled. "Are you not going to prepare your husband's supper, lassie? You must not neglect him for me."

Then Star got up and resumed her work.

She did not make more preparation for Hubert than she could help. She put sweet flowers in her mother's room. She made it bright with little ornaments from the parlour.

"Richarda shall sit here and have a supper-party with you," she said, "while I attend to my husband."

This was the order of things when Hubert came home. He was late. The windows were shut and the lamp lit when he sat down to read his paper. The lamp glared at him unpleasantly without the shade, which had been taken upstairs. The room had not all the daintiness to which he had grown accustomed. Star made no feint; the front she turned to him was gloomy.

"Hubert, I have something to say to you."

"Come and sit down and say it then." He was tired and sat in her mother's chair near the window. He drew a small chair near him with one arm as he spoke.

"I won't sit down." She stood not far from him, about the middle of the small room. The door was shut. "Hubert."

He raised his eyes interrogatively.

"Why did you tell me? What makes you suppose that I shall not tell my mother and sister, and blaze it abroad everywhere?"

"What would you gain by doing that? and how much would you lose?"

“Gain or lose!”—with contempt. “Do you suppose that everybody is actuated by low motives of self-interest as you are?”

“Upon my word, I never saw you look half so handsome in my life! Are you going to box my ears, or what?” He was not laughing; there was a little genuine apprehension in his manner, but only of immediate violence, not of any disaster to his reputation.

“No, I won’t strike you, because I will never degrade myself by touching you when I can help it.”

He sprung to his feet, stung into great anger. “What do you take me for, to think I will let you speak to me that way?” His face had turned very colourless; his dark eyes were peering out of it at her.

“I will speak to you as I choose, and I take you for what you *are*; I needn’t repeat the word—it is well enough known to us both.”

He tried to reason down his own anger. He had the rare sense which sees that uncontrolled anger is never wise.

“I am,” he said slowly, “a newspaper reporter. “If I were only that——”

“Well?”

“Richarda would not be learning to walk, and your mother would not have the comforts she needs.”

What an intellect this man had—to perceive that if he boasted in the slightest of what he had done for her the value of his kindness would instantly be less—to perceive this, not by native delicacy of feeling, but by clear thought on a subject that was all-important to him.

He hastened to go on, speaking in a calmer voice. “Not that we should not have been glad to do all that

we could for them in any case, but that we could not have afforded it on my salary. Have they not a right, the right of helpless goodness, to all that any one can do for them? If you believe in a heavenly arranging of things here you must believe that they have far more right to the value of the money than men who got it in a bad way and would spend it in a worse. Oh," as she made an impatient movement, "I am not trying to hoodwink you by hypocritical words. I told you from the first that I was not virtuous. I don't believe in your notions of right and wrong. I only want to show you that I am not worse, even by your morals, than men whom good people tolerate with respect. If you are going to fly out at me in this way, why don't you put Miss Gower up to scolding her uncle because he gambles with men he knows can't afford to pay him?"

He was using many words to try to pacify her by time, if not by conflicting ideas. He partially succeeded, for, not knowing exactly what to say first, she leaned herself against the dining table in a less threatening attitude.

In a minute, "It's very wrong of you, Hubert, to say you told me you were not good: you know as well as I do that nothing on earth would have induced me to marry you if I had known. You did a mean, dishonourable thing in marrying me, just as much as if you had boasted of your own excellence."

He did not speak for a minute or two.

"There are several things I could say, Star, in answer to that unkind speech, but I do not wish to say what will hurt you, even though you don't seem to mind hurting me."

“Say them. Do you think anything can make me more miserable?”

“Well”—with some diffidence—“you know I would rather *not* have married you so soon; I wanted you to know me better and judge for yourself.”

“Go on; tell me that it was I who proposed, I who made love, I who urged haste.” She spoke with a hard misery in her young voice which he could not help pitying. “Go on; say all that. It is true; I won’t deny it.”

“No, it isn’t true; it’s as false as a half truth usually is. You didn’t ask me to marry you; the most that you did in that line was to tell me that, for the sake of your mother and sister, you could love an old wreck of a drunkard, if he would be kind to them. You pointed him out to me; do you remember the man?”

She covered her face with her hands. “I was a headstrong, passionate child, but you did wrong to take me at my word.”

“Most men in my place would think I had great excuse in your pretty face. You cannot expect all the world to live up to the exalted standard of an invalid lady like your mother. I don’t say I did right to take you at your word; but did I take you at your word? At the time I did, but afterwards, when I had seen you all, and saw what you were, I asked you to put it off till the end of the summer. I would have done all that I have done for you and the others, and left you free to decide at the end.”

“That is idle talking. I should *not* have been free.”

“You *would*, so far as any claim on my part was concerned. Do you think I take no satisfaction in doing a good action?”

“I see you have entangled me in a net of words so that it may appear that you are not open to my reproach. You have taken care to make the marriage all my doing.”

“It is you who say that, not I. I know that you did not want to marry me; you preferred it only to seeing your mother die in a hole that was not fit for her, or to letting me find a better place for her before we married. How can you think I am taunting you with making love to me when I keep telling you that I saw all along that you only sacrificed yourself to save them? No one else would dare to say before me what you have said—that *you* made love.”

If he had taunted her, her anger would have known no bounds, but his eagerness to assert the propriety of her motives puzzled and distracted her. When one is giving battle of fixed purpose it is confusing if the enemy comes over to help. She wanted to get him back to his own side.

“I did hurry the wedding and make love to you too,” she repeated sullenly. “I remember, perfectly, kissing you when you didn’t——”

“Don’t, Star!”—with impatience. “How can you twist things so? I can’t bear to hear you speak of things like that when—when I can see you are angry with me. Abuse me as much as you like”—standing up.—“I’ll hear everything you have to say; but don’t abuse yourself—I can’t stand it.”

Was his emotion genuine, or was it a masterstroke

of policy? Her faith in him was so shaken that she looked at him entirely perplexed. He sat down again, as if ashamed of the feeling he had displayed.

“Go ahead; let’s have it out.”

“You know that when you said at first that you were not good, we took it as a proof of humility, which is the foundation of all goodness. You knew that quite well at the time.”

“Well, I thought then of warning you that the simple truth is often the worst lie; but you had such a good illustration of it in your own conduct that I thought you couldn’t avoid seeing it. You told your mother that I had offered you an umbrella that rainy day. It was perfectly true; but you know it was equivalent to saying that we had not met by appointment, which was—a lie. Mind, I don’t blame you; it was the best you could do.”

“It was not the best I could do. When I answered your advertisement—and all that time, until I was married—I was a foolish, wicked girl. I had lost all faith in God just because, after making us happy all our lives, He seemed to desert us for a little while. I wouldn’t wait with patience to see what He would do—I went to you for help; and now I am punished. But you were dishonourable, because you knew that if I had known the whole truth I should *never* have married you.”

“I’m aware that you would not. I didn’t salve my conscience by supposing that all I said made the transaction quite above board; but you must remember that I didn’t, and don’t, believe that a miracle was going to be worked on your behalf, any more than you did.

Your mother would have died in that hole, and Richarda too, sooner or later; and as for you ——” He looked at her a minute, and broke off with a change of voice. “You may think I am talking to you like a grandfather, when I am not much older than you; but I was brought up for some time in the streets. When you came to me, thinking yourself so well able to take care of yourself; when you applied to me so impulsively, and trusted me so easily, was I to blame for thinking if I didn’t deceive you in this business, some other man would in a worse?”

She felt more angry and more softened at the same moment—angry at the sketch of herself, because it was true; softened by the thought of his protection.

“There could hardly have been a worse,” she said sadly, drearily. “You have made me the wife of a common thief.”

“What cause have you to insult me?”

“If the truth insults you, I can’t help it.” Her passion was rising again, like a wind that had lulled and again gathered force.

He answered with a quiet anger that would have frightened her at a less troubled time.

“In the first place, there is a great deal that is true that is insulting to say. If I say to you that I pay for everything your mother eats and wears, I insult you, simply by saying it. It is not my business to make that remark to you. I should be a beast if I did. Have I ever done such a thing?”

“No,” she agreed, after a moment’s reflection.

“In the second place, it is not true. I am not a common thief; I am a very uncommon one.”

It seemed extraordinary to her that he should be able to say such a thing, speaking, as he did, out of the still, white heat of anger. Yet he did say it proudly, earnestly. Her woman's sense of humour, that could recognize absurdity even when it came grinning from behind her own worst woes, was sorely put to it not to smile.

"What is the difference?" she asked scornfully.

"A common thief makes thieving a business, so that he is forced to steal on all occasions or starve. He gets compromised with other thieves, and is dragged into all their villainous schemes as well as his own. Whether owners of property are honest or dishonest, whether they spend their money on good objects or bad, whether they are helpless or ill, or even if they are women, an ordinary thief is compelled to take whatever he can get from them. He cannot choose his victims, or limit the amount he takes from them."

Star listened with great surprise. She was weary, and seated herself absently on the edge of the dining-table against which she had been leaning. Her feet did not quite touch the ground, and she swung them a little.

"Go on," she said.

"Well, *I* don't live by stealing. I have a regular occupation, which uses most of my time and supports me. I have no accomplices, and I have not lost my reputation. Consequently, I can afford to have principles in stealing, just as you have principles in other things. I never yet took money from a man who got it honestly, or who wasn't in a position to protect it if he had the foresight to do so; and as to frightening lonely women at night, or suffocating people with chloroform—bah!"

He did not raise his voice as he spoke, but there was an excited note in it which assured her that, for the first time, he was talking to her freely on the subject nearest his heart. A machinist might have spoken thus of the dream of his inventive genius, or an artist of the joys of his profession. Hubert Kent was talking of theft.

"A common thief," he went on, "runs the risk of being arrested and sent to prison; if it's the fear of that that makes it so distasteful to you, you needn't be afraid—I will never be caught."

"It is impossible to do what you do and not risk that," she whispered.

"No, it isn't, when a man has more wits than other people—at least, the risk is almost *nil*; but if some chance works against the best plans, there is always one sure way out."

"What way?"

"Death," he said. "A man, unless he's a fool, ought to prefer death to disgrace."

An old memory rose within her, as memories evoked by similar ideas will sometimes come. First, like some phantom of the present that has been preacted by us in some former state, then more clearly, she knew what she remembered—how, when she was a little child, she had heard her father talk with his friends about an incident of the civil war then in progress; they too had said something like this. She saw herself a little, wondering child, looking up to them as they spoke, burning with sympathy for the heroic sentiment but half understood. She put the memory from her, hardly noticing the contrast.

“Do you mean you would prefer your own death, or some one else’s?”

She did not mean to sneer. The question rose involuntarily out of her practical wit as an important one to be asked just then.

He looked at her sharply. “I don’t intend to kill any one under any circumstances,” he said. “Killing is nasty work, even if I hadn’t any principle, which you seem to think.”

She did think it.

“Do you mean to say, Hubert, that if you were wrestling with a pursuer in the dark alone, and had to choose between your life and his, you wouldn’t choose his?”

“Why do you speak so scornfully?” he asked angrily, but not loudly. “Would *you* rather kill or be killed?”

“I?—but I don’t steal.”

“Well, I do, on certain occasions; and when I tell you that I never carried arms of any sort, and never will, you will see that I shall not kill any one. I outwit men, I don’t fight them; and I shan’t fail in outwitting them. But if I did, if the worst came, they would take me dead, not alive. I don’t carry arms; I’ll show you something I do carry.” He took a small purse from an inner pocket, and showed her some tiny packets of poison in it. “One would kill a man in about a minute,” he observed. “And I’ll tell you another thing while we are on a disagreeable subject; if that did happen, they would find my affairs in a state that would entirely exonerate you. I settled that when I married you.”

She did not feel so much affected by the sight of the poison, or touched by the provision suggested for her-

self, as she felt might seem fitting. She felt strangely contemptuous, as if it were some schoolboy braggadocio she was listening to; yet she knew there was this difference, that schoolboys talk and do not do, and this man had committed the crimes and made the preparations of which he now spoke so sparingly and quietly. She knew it, yet she could not realize it. She sat on the edge of the table and swung one foot with restless impatience. Her mind was working, flitting from one part of the subject to another.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t think I have anything more to say. I match my wits against rich scoundrels, and I take my life in my hand when I do it. I don’t do it often; when I do, I consider the money I make that way rightfully mine. I run very little risk, and you none. I am sorry you dislike it so much, and yet I’m not, either. I’d rather have you just as you are than anything else. Keep your own principles what they are, and don’t be troubled about mine. We can drop the subject.”

“Drop the subject!”—in indignation. “Do you suppose I am going to go on spending stolen money, and letting you go and get more whenever you like?”

“How can you help it?”

“I don’t know; but one thing I do know, and that is, I *will* help it and hinder it too.” She nodded her head at him with no small degree of decision.

He looked at her intently, seeming to take the measure of her will and power.

“Very well. When you have found out how, you can tell me.”

“Hubert,” she began again, a little curiosity getting

the better of her contempt, "did I see you, dressed in Montagu's clothes, putting out those lamps the night of the dog affair?"

"Yes."

"And did you know me?"

"Yes; and I nearly gave up the job, although I had been planning it for months, that I might find out what was the matter with you. As it was, I risked going slow till I saw you safe in at the doctor's gate."

"And did you take the dog in at the window with——" She stopped. She had come there to reprove his sin; she perceived that there was no virtuous dignity in the idle curiosity she was displaying. She ceased to feel the curiosity as the dreary wretchedness of her situation came over her. She noticed for the first time that she was sitting on the edge of the table, and she got down feeling that that attitude alone marked her denunciation of him as an entire failure. The little room looked untidy and garish. She felt undignified. It struck her how commonplace life was compared with what it might be expected to be—common and disagreeable—and this the most commonplace fact of all, that the husband sitting so familiarly near her was the thief whose unknown identity was the theme of every one's talk.

She turned in silence to go out of the room, not with the feeling that it was worth while to go into any other, but because it was no use to stay there. But when he saw her intention he slipped past her and stood before her, with his back to the door.

"Star!"

She made a futile gesture to wave him away.

“There is one thing you have said that you must take back before you leave this room.”

There was a gleam in his eyes that she could not construe. She stood stubborn, supposing him to be trying to exact some promise of future compliance or apology for what he termed her insults.

“You must take it back,” he repeated, but almost gently.

“Which?”

“What you said when I asked you if you were going to box my ears. You remember?”

It was some moments before she did remember.

“I am not going to quarrel with you,” he urged; “at least, not if I can help it. I own the whole affair is rather rough on you. I can see that. I don’t mind your scolding a bit at first; but I am a man, in my own house, and you are my wife. I am not going to be spoken to as if I were a dog. Come, give me a kiss, Star; that will take it back.”

“You pretty fury!” he went on indulgently, looking at the anger of her aspect. “You look as if you would rather thrash me. Well, do it; I won’t retaliate. I’ll be as meek as Moses. But I won’t have you drawing up your skirts from me in contempt; you must understand that now, once for all.” He continued after a minute. “Come, one little kiss, Star, and I’ll let you pass. You have some hazy notion that you ought not to give it to me because I am a sinner, but surely you can set it down to a past account, and let it stand against the many times I might have teased you for kisses and didn’t. Think of all those weeks you did nothing but nurse Richarda; even your mother thought I was badly neglected.”

She turned at her mother's name, throwing herself into a chair by the table, and burying her head in her arms.

"What is it?" he asked, coming nearer.

She told him, with broken voice, what Bramwell had said, that the time of her mother's death was certainly drawing very near. She did not look up. She threw the information at him as if he were unworthy to hear it. She could not see the real concern in his face, but she was surprised into looking up by the hearty trouble of his voice.

"I am very sorry."

"Sorry!" she exclaimed, looking at him. She felt as if the gloom of her own sorrow in this matter had been dispersed by another idea concerning it, as a strong wind will scatter a storm. "Sorry! yes, I suppose you are. My mother's presence certainly adds much to the respectability you covet."

"You are hard on me," he said.

She went on without heeding. "But I am glad—yes, glad; for she at least will not have to live much longer upon *your* money."

Her words were flung out upon absolute silence. He stood looking at her so gravely that she grew frightened at the absence of all reply.

But when she rose nervously he moved too. He took her in strong arms, in spite of her resistance, and kissed her. It was only after that he let her go.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

AUGUST was upon the land, with its shortening days and heavy, darkened leaves. The end of the town where Kent and Mr. Gower lived was not entirely out of reach of harvest fields, but most of those within sight were not filled with grain. There were great squares, showing high rows of flowering beans or the flat, brown foliage of strawberry plants. These were interspersed with odd-shaped bits of pasture land, across which there was right of footway to neighbouring villages. This was mainly the character of the land.

It was Star's great pain in those days that everything appeared, everything was, just the same, in itself and to others, as it had been before the knowledge came to her that her husband was a criminal. She, too, like a work-horse in the harness of circumstance, must go on in the daily round that, such a little while before, had seemed sweet to her. It is only a very strong or very weak nature that can stop, like a watch whose works have gone wrong, in the midst of life's running, and mark an epoch of inward experience by suspension of habit.

One thing became clear to her—that, till her mother died, no revolution in their household was possible. How strong, she asked herself, was her own honesty,

when she felt compelled to buy delicacies for the invalid, even though the money she used had been stolen? Even she had not the sternness of principle that could make her omit small comforts that might make the dying bed easier, and the last days upon earth more bright. Her little excesses were in pence, not shillings, yet she spent those pence knowing that they were not hers. Her heart bled as she paid them, wondering drearily whether, while she found it needful to be thus dishonest, Hubert could be blamed for the part he played. She felt the full force of his defence and his excuses. The clear line which she had always supposed to lie between right and wrong vanished as she walked up to it. She was like one wandering in a wilderness whose path suddenly becomes merged in sand and weeds.

But towards Hubert she showed nothing of this—neither relenting nor perplexity—because she felt that to do so would be to be lost. There lay at once the cause and the proof of her weakness; the eternal right seemed to her to be wavering before his argument, and she must prop it up by obstinacy. She went about before him a changed creature, not neglectful of her work or slovenly in her dress, but in both her work and dress was lacking all that exquisite freshness and perfection which had characterized them when she was happy. She looked to him as a tree in August would look if set beside its perfect self in June; and Hubert, urging to himself that to display irritation was his most foolish course, grew more and more irritated day by day.

Mrs. Thompson was undoubtedly dying; her feeble life ebbed lower imperceptibly hour by hour. Since the slight shock that Bramwell's fatal verdict had given her

it had not been thought wise for her to leave her room. Yet she had no agony. Richarda sat by her constantly. They could all only wait and try to live as if the shadow of death were not upon the house. A shadow certainly was on Star's face which Richarda naturally thought was this shadow, and she reproved her sister gently for sorrowing, she said, as those who have no hope.

"It distresses mother to see you this way," she said. "It is so unlike you, Star."

Richarda's own face was bright with reflection of her mother's cheery smile.

"Very well," said Star meekly; and after that she was more like her old self in the sick-room.

One regulation she had made—that Hubert should not enter her mother's presence. No one knew of this resolve—she made excuses to her mother when he was asked for; she gave him to understand that he was not wanted at the bedside—but her heart had the desperate attitude of a watch-dog who would rather die than allow an enemy to touch the guarded treasure.

A few days after Star's first sad quarrel with him, Hubert came home one evening bringing an urgent request from Mrs. Couples that Star would, if possible, come and see Tod, who was worse rather than better. Hubert told Richarda, who was downstairs on an errand.

"I will take Star down this evening if she will go," he said. "There is no sense in her staying in the house all the time; she will make herself ill."

Richarda had her own sentiments about Star's duty to Hubert. She left her sister with no excuse. Hubert overheard her urging his cause.

"Mother frets so that you should neglect him, Star;

and you know vexation is the worst thing for her. I am sure she will rest better this evening if she knows you have spent an hour or two out with him."

Richarda laboured up the narrow stair, her crutches thumping on the steps. Hubert felt an impulse to go after and lift her and her crutches to the top, but he had not sufficient aptitude for touching other people to feel able to follow it. He stood still awkwardly, and drummed on the table. In a little time Star came, ready to go out, but with that averted, restless glance that meant absence of all union with him.

They took their seats on the top of the little omnibus. During Richarda's convalescence it had been Star's favourite diversion to be jolted into town on the top of this vehicle along with Hubert on a summer evening. Hubert would set her at the end, if possible, and sit by her, with his arm on the back of the seat, and she, thus secure, would sit quite upright and scan her fellow passengers and the surrounding street with the delight which a vivacious mind takes in simple pleasures. The feeling of interest and delight revived in her now as they climbed up and Hubert paid his pennies. She crushed it down, in the belief that any comfort for her was sinful in the present circumstance. The wine of her natural gaiety was being turned into vinegar by the conscientious scruple which oppressed her.

Hubert had brought her out, however, as much with intent to win her back to himself as to fulfil Mrs. Couples's request. He began by telling her a little incident of newspaper life, how a wealthy tradesman, who had been issuing advertising pictures with their journal, having entitled a print of a countryman in town,

“Rus in Urbe,” had wished to label a representation of a townsman in the country “Urbe in Rus.” Hubert rarely laughed; his lips curled over the joke, as he told it, with quiet satisfaction, and he felt, rather than saw, that Star would have liked to smile, and didn’t. He next tried to comfort her in respect to her mother, telling her it was unreasonable to grieve too sadly in face of an event which they had long anticipated with resignation. He only got half his words said; he might as well have talked to a stone on the subject of that grief as to Star.

They got down at Mrs. Couples’s gate, to find that lady seated, as was her custom in summer, upon a chair outside her own front door. The lilac bush, that had worn its spring green when Star first passed it, was gray and dusty now. The wallflowers had long been gone. The asters, that should have replaced them, needed tending. The voice from the chair began before they were inside the gate.

“Don’t look at them asters, Mrs. Kent. No, dear; it’s your husband they’re needing. Yes, Mr. Quigley’s a very decent gentleman. Yes; but he’s not your husband, my dear; he’s not indeed; no, not your hus——”

“He certainly isn’t, and for which I am thankful.” Hubert flicked his comment at her with an alacrity which almost disconcerted her—not quite.

“—band—no, dear, no—not for taking care of the garden and turning a neat hand to all things—yes.”

The door stood open as usual, and Hubert dived with familiar ease into the recess of open entry and the mistress’s own sitting-room and brought out a chair for Star.

“Yes, a neat hand—yes. And Mr. Tod, dear, ’s not as well as could be wished, and I’m really, as one may say, at my wit’s end with him—yes, I might say so; for what with his not liking the same constitution of dishes as Mr. Quigley, so that I have to spend most of my time sitting by the fire stirring and taking off just at the right moment—for *you* know that a moment too much is disastrous—yes, and what with Tod having grown so soft-hearted of late, weeping and wanting me always by to hear his sighs, and having something evidently on his mind—yes, and him in a very suffering way.”

“I am sure you must have a great deal to do,” said Star with sweet brevity. She felt the assurance she gave, although she could not help remembering that she had never seen Mrs. Couples do anything.

Hubert sat on the low doorstep and began to tie up an aster to a small stick he had found.

“Well, dear, I am sure, although I have so much to do, what with sitting in Tod’s room, a-listening to his sighs and waiting on Quigley every touch and turn, I won’t say but what you’ve had more yourself—yes, with your sister’s getting well, and Mr. Kent telling me the sad way your mother’s in—dear, yes, I said to him that for a bride your heart’s burdened. Yes, I’m sure I’m very sorry about your mother—sorry, yes; but one can see she’s prepared to go; it’s in her face—yes, yes, yes.”

Mrs. Couples’s affirmatives seemed to be going mildly off into some aerial region of her theological ideas. Star recalled her gently.

“Thank you, I am too unhappy not to be thankful for any sympathy; but please do not talk about my mother—I cannot bear it.”

“No, dear; well, but as to being unhappy”—even she, unthinking and unceasing in her tranquil flow of words, seemed to pause a moment in contemplation of this word—“no, I wouldn’t just say ‘unhappy,’ being so well settled, and your ma herself pleased, I’m sure, to leave you with such an excellent husband; yes, I wouldn’t say ‘unhappy,’ although it’s a grief, yes, but not so bad as to be alone in the world. There’s poor Mr. Tod—well, yes, one might say alone in the world, with some trouble on his mind. That was why I said to Mr. Kent when he kindly stepped in to inquire, I said maybe you would come, what with your bright young face and pretty ways—yes, he might unburden his mind to you. It’s a terrible thing to hear him a-sighing, and he doesn’t seem able to explain to me, though liking me to sit and listen and a-wanting to tell me; but he says—yes—that without he feels the infinity he can’t—no, and it seems he really can’t—no; for I’m sure I’ve sat a-listening hours—yes, dear, hours; but he can’t without the infinity.”

Mrs. Couples gave benign and credulous utterance to her tale, her expressionless eyes gazing, not at the faces of her listeners, but at some misty object of middle distance, from the sight of which she seemed to derive endless store of placidity.

“I shouldn’t care for him to feel too much of an affinity for my wife,” said Hubert, chiefly by way of explanation to Star.

“No—no, dear, no,” murmured Mrs. Couples soothingly. Her voice was like the sleeping murmur of a mother to a child fretting in its sleep, so far removed did it seem from any intelligent grasp of the words she used. “No, dear; but I wouldn’t like him to lie there

long, which I hope and pray not, with anything private and confidential on his mind—like a last will and testament, for instance—no, dear. And he said maybe if I'd be patient an' sit long enough he might speak out, finding what he needs to speak with; but la, dear, I've sat and sat, and the cooking to do, yes, and him in such a suffering way; and when I've been talking to him about this thing and that, and often mentioned you—yes, dear—for a cheery subject for the poor young man—able, as you are, to make good coffee—and I said, 'Yes, you should get well, Mr. Tod, and get a pretty young wife, like Mr. Kent;' but he neither said hump nor grump, often as I mentioned the subject. So I says, 'She'd connect you with grand folks, too, making friends so easy with that sweet Miss Gower, that called to see you, and driving in a carriage.' Yes, so I talked to hearten him up a bit, and I caught him holding his breath to that extent he nearly choked—yes, poor young man, and since then he's seemed to like quite regular to hear about you and Mr. Kent. So—yes, dear—I thought——" She went on in placid repetition of what she had thought and what she had said to Hubert concerning the office she still wished Star to perform.

Whether or not the suspicion which instantly occurred to Star that Miss Gower had some connection with the sufferer's depression of spirits had occurred to her motherly mind Star could not tell. Perhaps Mrs. Couples was stupid; perhaps a real delicacy prompted her to say no more. Star felt convinced that Hubert shared her suspicion and enjoyed it.

"I'll go up and see if the chap's fit to see her," he said.

He came back and escorted Star up the stair, but left

her upon the threshold of a small back room upon the landing to go in alone, left her with a penetrating glance of such deep amusement that she, standing for a moment to collect her thought, could not keep in mind either Tod or the object of her visit, she was so filled with wonder to see that a mind freighted with crime could so easily lend itself to the spirit of a passing episode. He went lightly down the familiar stair, with apparently no other thought than of diverting himself with Mrs. Couples and delighting her by tending the asters.

Star went in to see Tod, trying to realize that the visit might be a work of mercy and ought to be acceptably performed.

This little room of Tod's, being just above his sitting-room, was, like it, penetrated by the last daylight. Its window, bald of curtains, looked comfortlessly out on a lonely expanse of sky. It was growing late, but the room was still quite light. The young man lay, with his head pillowless at the foot of the bed, steadily gazing in dejection at the open sky. There was little else noticeable in the room but a table of medicine-bottles.

The patient, who either did not observe her entrance at first or affected not to do so, gave her a civil and grateful greeting when she came between him and the light. He was not able to raise himself far, poor fellow; he was terribly emaciated and weak.

"Wouldn't you like a pillow?" she asked. She noticed that there were two that had been kicked or cuffed into odd places on the bed. The thick patchwork quilt was rolled round the man as if by much wriggling he had swathed himself like a mummy.

"No," he replied, putting his head down sideways,

"I like it better without; it's a change. If you had to lie here month after month, doing nothing, seeing nothing, you'd like a change." He sighed deeply. The sighs struck Star as of artificial make, but as having become almost natural through long habit.

"Yes, so I should." Then she was chiefly conscious that she could think of nothing else to say.

He looked at her with a long and melancholy stare. "There's the district visitor, and Mother Couples, and Kent sometimes, and the doctor, who come to see me," he whispered, "and now you've come—that's all." If his sighs were affected, the weak faltering of his voice was not.

"Is the district visitor nice?" asked Star.

"A worthy lady, I suppose," he sighed. "She tries to do me good; she never will."

There was a sort of sing-song rhythm about his whispers, as if he were accustomed to make poetry to himself.

"Oh, why not?" asked Star with conventional cheerfulness. "You surely are not so good, Mr. Tod, but what you, like all the rest of us, might be made a little better."

"I'm either too good or too bad," he whispered earnestly. "I live in another sphere. She comes; she sits; she smiles; she talks; she reads; she prays; she goes. Her smile, her thought, looks out of her eyes; but it doesn't look into mine."

"I'm afraid you do not try to meet her half way."

"I'm no infidel. I believe what she says," he whispered still more earnestly; "but she might as well not say it."

There was another pause.

Star felt that anything she could say might as well not be said. The pause began to be filled up with an intention to speak on his part. He sighed and rolled a little over, so that one side of his face was hidden in the arm on which it lay, and he looked at her only with one eye. His intention to speak seemed so large that it swelled within him and heaved the quilt. Star waited, almost suspending her breath; but no word came, only at last a profound sigh. She began to perceive in what Mrs. Couples's listening had consisted.

She sat wondering if he had had any intimation of the hope with which she was sent, and whether he would be more or less likely to open his heart if she informed him that she was there for the purpose of receiving his confidence. She had come into the room supposing that possibly his untold tale consisted in some nonsense about the absurd letter Marian Gower had received, had come pushed by a request and caring very little whether her mission was successful or not; but it was impossible to be with this man, affected and absurd as he was, without feeling an increase of sympathy. It was certainly impossible to see him on the verge of a communication and not feel curiosity as to what it might be.

Again the quilt seemed to inflate with impending confession. He buried his brow further in his arm.

"In my youth I hoped for joy," he began in muffled accent, "hoped for all bright things that life can give."

"Yes," said Star interrogatively.

He moved a little so that one melancholy blue eye was full upon her.

"I was disappointed," he responded briefly. "Life

is not joyful, Mrs. Kent." That seemed to be all he had to say.

"Oh," said Star earnestly, "I know what that is, Mr. Tod. I always expected to be very, very happy, till I found—that it was no use expecting."

The low dreariness of her tone seemed to touch him, not with surprise that she should be sad, but with pleasure in hearing of a kindred experience.

"I do not know in what your sorrow lies," he whispered huskily, "but mine lay in finding no soul congenial to my own. When I grew to years of discretion I perceived that in my grade of life to hope for such was folly. There was none, nor could be, and I said, 'I will live in the pleasures of a refined mind.' I took music; I took poetry; I took imagination." He sighed.

"And you were disappointed in them?" Star tapped her foot with the feeling that her attention began to revert from his affliction to his affectation.

"No, not in them, not in them—never in them."

It again appeared that he had nothing further to say. He moved his arm from under his head and lay with one temple resting on the mattress, looking very dejected.

Star wondered whether it was at the period when the pleasures of the imagination had been in the ascendant that he had pleased himself with the self-deception of Miss Gower's letter. Perhaps the sick man's nervous condition was susceptible to his companion's thought, or perhaps it was mere coincidence that just then he raised himself slightly and, with a hasty glance round the room, whispered—

"She told you?"

She hardly knew why she would rather have been able to assure him that Miss Gower had kept his secret. She could not even pretend that she did not know to whom and to what he referred.

“Yes.”

“I am deeply disgraced,” he said, with a sigh.

“Oh, come, Mr. Tod; you cannot be so foolish as to let such a small thing as that dwell on your mind. Miss Gower would never think of it again, I am sure. She mentioned it only in confidence to us.”

“And why should she not think of it? If her dog or cat had done such a thing she would have thought it worth some attention.”

Star, with hasty movement, dropped her glove and stooped to pick it up, thus hiding her face.

But he, all melancholy, asked her why she smiled.

“Such a feat performed by either of them would be worthy of attention,” she said.

“She would be angry with them if they insulted her,” he pursued, without a perception of humour.

“You would not want her anger, would you, Mr. Tod?”

“I should feel it the greatest privilege to have it.”

When he had meekly said this he relapsed into an untalkative humour. The darkness was gathering, even in that western chamber, and Star felt that, for all that had been said, nothing had passed that could be supposed to have relieved Tod of any particular secret.

“After all, Mr. Tod, what is Miss Gower to you? Why should you care what she thinks of you?”

He turned his face from her and made not the slightest reply.

“I will take any apology to her if you wish to send one.”

Still no answer.

“Mrs. Couples thought you had some distress on your mind. I hope it is not connected with Miss Gower.” A pause. “But whether or not, if I can be of any service to you concerning it, I should be glad.” Silence. “I hope you will believe me when I say so, for—I have great trouble of my own. I can feel for any one else who is in trouble.”

Her voice died away in eloquent faintness, and he stirred and turned in the waning light.

“You ask me what she is to me,” he said. “I *love* her.”

There was a solemn intensity in his words. She saw his eyes shining in the grayness, like a wounded animal's.

She found no words for the cheerful rebuke or stern advice which she had been prepared to administer.

“Can I not love as well as another man?” he whispered with pathetic dignity. “Tell her”—his weak hand touched Star's dress in trembling eagerness—“tell her that if I am going to die I would be willing to die if she would come and sit one hour beside me then.”

Star had risen and was standing beside him.

“I hardly understand.”

“Ask her”—he was hasty and excited now—“if I were dying, if she would come and see me then. I could not ask her till then.”

“I cannot think it would be necessary to *die* to obtain such a slight favour from a kindhearted lady like

Miss Gower." She spoke dubiously. She could not decide how much she might safely promise.

"I could not ask her to come till then," he repeated.

"Star!" called Hubert from the stair.

She went down to catch the returning omnibus.

CHAPTER II.

"WHAT did you make of Tod?" asked Hubert. His face was again kindling with amusement. They were jolting homeward on the top of the omnibus.

Star was just on the point of relating all that had occurred. Hubert and she had so often talked about Tod, and the self-addressed letter had been the cream of the subject. Hubert's sense of humour matched hers, although stronger and rougher; they saw the same fun and pathos in life. This was a great tie, perhaps the greatest between them; but now, instead of telling her tale, she remembered that she was not on good terms with her husband and checked herself.

This was not comfortable. She felt the misery of it. What Hubert felt she could not tell; he was evidently determined to ignore her ill-humour and crush it, if possible, by that good-nature which he called kindness. This was plain, but she perceived also that a more natural impulse of impatience was struggling within.

He could not altogether control this irritation. When they alighted he put her hand in his arm roughly. They were walking thus past the remaining houses when he

dropped it again cavalierly to dart out and separate two lads who were fighting in the middle of the road. A group of boys were already attempting the separation; one or two people had stopped curiously on the side walk. Star stood exactly as she had been left, and waited. She felt wholly indifferent to the angry passions of the boys; angrily, discontentedly indifferent to anything. As she stood the voices of two women at a window penetrated into her mind through the noise of the street.

“Not particularly good looking, to my mind”—scornfully; “and they say that he took them from starvation, that the three of them hadn’t a penny to bless themselves with. He’s got the old lady and that crippled girl on his hands, and paid a sight of money for their doctoring, and he paid back all the chapel had given them. Father heard that at chapel.”

“That’s what I call gen’rous.” This last was spoken with enthusiasm.

Hubert came back, and Star put her hand in his arm, this time without compulsion.

When they had left other houses behind and came to their own row, the three-quarter moon was hanging bright over the fields. Without it the night would have grown dark. In its light the high road, which ran long and white between the dark verdure on either side, assumed a look of mysterious interest, as if it might have strange wayfarers upon it and be used for errands unfit for clearer light.

Beautiful as the night was Star would have turned in at her own door with a sense of relief, but Richarda lay in wait for them at the upper window.

“There is no use knocking, for I won’t open the door yet,” she whispered, her head out of the sash. “Mother sends her love, and says she is resting very comfortably, and is so pleased that you are out. Miss Gower’s been here, and she said we were to ask you to go on up there. Her uncle’s ill again, and she is alone.”

It was evidently a friendly conspiracy to enforce on Star more air and exercise, more of her husband’s companionship. She felt full of angry objections, but she could not reveal them to Richarda.

She turned silently, drawn by Hubert. It was the first time he had been invited to go to see Miss Gower. He evidently felt inclined for the visit.

They went on, arm in arm, to the lonely parts of the moonlit road.

They had gradually become silent, but now their silence was no longer on Star’s part the result of the mental paralysis that had held her for days. The message from Miss Gower had roused her into clearer thought.

A man was walking on the dark grass of the roadside. They neither heard nor saw him till they were very near, and then the suddenness of his appearance made him seem to Star a suspicious creature. She started involuntarily and shrank close to Hubert for protection.

He was too alert to miss the chance; her movement was warmly met by his sheltering arm.

He spoke lovingly. “It is only a very decent labouring man.”

A few steps more and they came to a stile by which there was a short cut through Mr. Gower’s park. Star released herself from her husband’s arm and sat upon the bar.

“Do you want to rest?” he asked.

“I want to talk a little. I was afraid of that man because I did not know what he might be doing, and it is the night in which men do the worst things; so I drew back because I hadn't time to think that it is not for me to be frightened of such people. Why should I, when there is probably not on all this road between here and London a man who uses darkness for worse deeds than you use it for?”

“You have a better opinion of the world than facts would warrant,” he laughed; “but what's the use of saying this to me?”

“Not to make you angry, or because I am angry. I am your wife. We must come to some understanding.”

He gave a cautious look round as if sounding the grayness about them, and, assured that there was no covert within sound of their low voices for a listener, folded his arms and leaned against the post of the stile.

“You seem to expect me to go and see Miss Gower to-night and meet her as I last met her before I *knew*.”

“I suppose you're not going to tell her what you know as a matter of gossip.”

“What would you do if I did tell her?”

“What would I do if the moon fell into the earth? You *won't* tell.”

“I don't know where you get all this confidence in me.”

“I know that the chances are nine hundred and ninety-nine in a thousand that every one will obey the laws of their own character, and I risk the thousandth chance. It's only a fool who imagines that *anybody* may

do *anything*. Give me a chance to observe a person's character and habits, and I'll tell you, within an ace, what they'll do in any given circumstances. How did I know that old Allan and his sons would go down to that dog-fight? How did I know that old Gower would insist on hobbling out to hear the youngster roar, and hold on to Gilchrist, who was the only man worth fearing in the place? I didn't know it, but I risked everything on the knowledge that they almost certainly would, and life wouldn't be worth living if there wasn't a risk."

She paused, almost fascinated by his way of regarding things—a way so new to her and carrying with it all the personal magnetism of his likeableness. She wrenched herself back from the quicksand of acquiescence into which she felt her feet sinking.

"I do not know by what mysterious methods you worked in either case, or what instruments you used, and I don't want to. You went into my friend's house, and you stole, and you expect me to go there and meet her as if that hadn't happened, to go there with you as if I thought you a reliable man." She looked fearfully round at the blackness in the grove of trees under which they must pass. "How do I know what you may do in the dark now?—what means you may have at your disposal for frightening and deceiving people in order to steal from them?" She was so anxious to speak in a whisper that her words came almost with a hissing sound. Then, a little more distinctly, she added, "I will not do it. I will not go with you there. I can never look Miss Gower in the face again and pretend to be her friend."

He made a visible effort to control anger. He kicked

the ground contemptuously, as if he would have liked to kick her.

“You are a fool,” he said coarsely.

She was very much frightened at his anger; she thought she had no plummet by which to measure its limits. Because she had sailed out of her bearings she fancied, like the ignorant mariners of old, that the unknown sea was bottomless. Yet, frightened at him as she was, she was conscious also of an unusual fear of the black space under the heavy August foliage of the grove which stood a stone’s throw from them. Her nerves, all racked by what had passed, cast up unnamed tremors into the region of her mind.

“I knew a girl once,” he said sneeringly, “who had been brought up among teetotallers, and I found that she actually thought the average man could not take a glass of wine without running very great risk of becoming a drunkard. That of course was sheer ignorance, both of wine and of men.”

“Some men are like that,” said Star. She was too nervous to wonder much at the subject.

“*Some* men are; but she had been trained on total abstinence tracts till she imagined alcohol to be some ambrosia of devils too sweet and delicious to be resisted by mortal man. That, I say, was well meant ignorance; and it didn’t do any one any good, for it overshot the mark. Now the modern moralist has exactly the same view about stealing and lying, and you, brought up upon it, like all other religious people, have inherited that feeling. You think that, because I hold it right to steal and lie in moderation, I shall soon begin to do it immoderately.”

He had quite an heroic pose as he spoke because he was so intensely in earnest. As for her, although she understood better than she appeared to do, she had not the wit to answer him quickly or well.

“Your squeamishness about not wanting me to go up to the Gowers to-night is as silly as if, because I often take a glass of beer, you would not ask me to go to our little cellar and bring up a bottle, for fear I should sit there and drink a dozen. I never happened to want a dozen bottles of beer, and if I did, I am not beast enough to drink them. You believe that I have possession of my faculties, I suppose?”

“I should never be afraid of your drinking too much, Hubert,” she protested; “that’s not your temptation.”

The pathos of her unconscious irrelevancy touched him, just as a swordsman might hesitate to push an antagonist who was using the wrong fence: he stopped his flow of talk. “Don’t you see that your injustice is insulting?”

“Did you ever say what was not true to me?”

“Yes; but I told you as few lies as I could. I told you, for instance, when I wanted you to have Bloom for Richarda, that I had got the money by inventing an advertisement. I don’t remember any other just now. I didn’t like it, but I couldn’t very well help it at the time; could I?”

“How can I ever trust you when I know you could tell a falsehood?”

“That’s just the argument”—his irritation was again apparent—“that I am telling you is so silly. A sensible man can exercise moderation in lies as well as

in anything else. For my own part, I dislike them, and I am glad to feel that they will never be necessary between us any more. You don't seem to realize, Star," he went on in a tone of forbearance, "that I am really very fond of you. Come, set your heart at rest" (he spoke encouragingly now); "I have no schemes on hand that even your saintly mother could object to. I shan't want to do anything naughty again for the next few years, for it's my interest to lie by a while. I'll pledge you my honour, if you like (although I don't think you should require it), that I'll be what you call honest and truthful until I give you fair warning that I am going to do another little bit of juggling for the sake of distributing the wealth of the nation in a more righteous way."

A bat flitted in the misty moonlight above them, flitted nearer and nearer, and when Star shrank with a low cry he jumped and flapped his hat to frighten it away, and watched it indignantly as, in its darting flight, it passed and repassed the black form of a low holly bush not far from them. He thought it was the bat that had frightened her. Then, leaning nearer her, he took up his speech.

"You will be satisfied with that? You know that what I promise I will perform."

There was a pause.

"My darling," he said, as if he were telling her something by the words. Never in all their mutual experience had he spoken to her with half such tender emotion.

Up and down the hedgerows of the moonlit fields the fragrance of summer air seemed to course with

wanton softness. The moonlight hung in the luminous thickness of the air, giving that illusive beauty to common things which that sort of liking he called love will give even to sin and shame.

He seemed to feel too much to speak. Again his emotion mastered him; he knelt on the ground, circling her with his arms. She could not help seeing the play of feeling on his sensitive face as he turned it upwards on her breast.

In another moment she had recoiled from him and, with a moan, torn herself from his grasp. She stood a few paces off on the short grass of the field, and he, gathering himself up as well as he might, stood as if a dangerous devil had taken possession of him.

“Do you not see, Hubert, that there can be nothing like love between us?”

“Indeed; and why?”

She was somewhat put to it to answer concisely. “Because”—passionately—“you are a bad man.”

“I am a bad man, am I?” He came near. He folded his arms and spoke through his teeth, the very stillness of his attitude evincing passion of a very different sort from that she had repulsed. “I am a man who, having been given nothing by the world but cruel and taunting charity, has endeavoured to give it more good than harm. I grew up moral by my own choice, no thanks to the cant teaching I heard. I made my own way. I found men of the highest reputation everywhere making money by overreaching the poor, spending that money in ways that are sheer waste and worse. I have overreached the rich and spent the money well. I am a bad man, am I?” He

came a step nearer. There was a threat in his voice that struck terror to her inmost soul. She could not imagine what his menace was going to be; she knew in advance that it would be worse than she could think. "I *am* a bad man—in your sense of the word, I am. I never made pretence of being other; but I tell you, Star, such as I am, you have it in your power to make me a million times worse." He stopped a moment, as if to think out a curse he was going to lay upon her. "When I advertised for a wife, I did not think it was in the power of any woman to move me from the course I had chosen; but you, with your pretty face, and your—your"—he stammered, passion impeding both thought and utterance—"and your"—it seemed as if he tried to use a bad word, but another came out of him—"angel ways, you have it in your power to make me a devil. And you'll do it if you go on like this." He had come very close. The breath of his still anger was hot on her cheek. He stepped a little back. He seemed to draw in his breath as one does when feeling a certain elation of conscious power. "I have it in me to be a magnificent villain," he sneered, nodding at her with bitter emphasis.

He stamped his heel in the tender sod, and, turning upon it, moved away. She stood motionless upon the spot she had reached in the short frenzied run she had made to escape his embrace.

He looked back to see if she followed him, and when she did not, he sat and waited where she had first sat on the stile.

"You can come now," he called moodily, "and let me make love to you or not, just as you please."

What use had she for movement? She felt as if she might as well stand there for ever, until she died. The blessed dew fell round her under the warm summer sky. The summer grasses stirred here and there with insect life. The moonlight lay in the stillness of the air. She knew it all with that intensity of observation which comes upon us when, in moments of some sudden terror by night, the muscles are all chained by fear and the mind is abnormally active to detect its cause.

No movement would come to her. She hardly breathed. What use was there in movement or breath?

Where could she go? To the dear shelter of the mother's arms which, till now, had been her habitual refuge, which, weak as they had been in earthly strength, were still a mighty stronghold to the wounded spirit? Had her mother been dead she might have cast herself down on the grass there and besought her comfort. She might have at least fancied her near; she would have known that somewhere, either near her or near through nearness to the Eternal Centre of the great human Soul, there was a spirit whose love and sympathy was peculiarly hers. But her mother was not dead, and while she lingered in earth's fragile tenement no moan or sob from her daughter must reveal this sorrow. It was a curious path for Star's thought to take just then. It was but a momentary darting glance at truth which she caught sight of by the shifting of the mists of her material ideas in this shock—at that moment she saw the value of death.

To whom could she go? Not to the dying mother, nor could she lean on the sister who was herself making

so brave a fight for health against the pains of weakness. She looked across the bit of moonlit grass to the dark form of her husband sitting upon the stile; he had become her enemy.

With a great turning of her soul to all that was beautiful and loving, her thought turned to Marian Gower, and she knew, as she had never known before, how dearly she had learned to love this sweet woman in those brief days of her happiness—and she, the wife of a thief, could no longer in common honesty claim her friendship. She had not even the relief of flying before an angel's sword; she must shut herself out from this paradise. She looked up where the dim outlines of luminous clouds were moving above the moonlit haze.

“Oh, God,” she said, “that I had never seen her!”

“What did you say?” called Hubert.

“I did not speak,” she replied, unconscious that she had spoken.

Then she did, as we all sometimes do, the thing that she least expected or was conscious of intending to do. She went close to him and spoke gently, reasonably.

“Hubert! It is not such a very large amount that you have taken, and you have part of it yet. If, after mother dies, we economize very much—you have no idea how careful I could be or how happy I could make you on a very little—perhaps, in a few years, you could pay it all back anonymously, and then, if you would never do it again, we could be happy. Will you do that, Hubert?”

“No.” The word was very surly.

“Why not?”

“Because I won’t. Now understand that, once for all.”

From his brutal tone she began to perceive that his former tolerance and good nature had had root in self-satisfaction—a satisfaction which nothing had been able to shake till she rudely recoiled from his softer mood. But she gained no encouragement from the fact that it could be thus shaken. She supposed that the brute which was now revealed had been not created by her scorn, but lying concealed within him always. Yet she went on with the courage of despair, not knowing why she spoke, for she had no hope.

“It is very hard, Hubert—isn’t it?—to tell me that I have so much power to make you worse, and no power to make you better?”

He seemed struck by that. The chief force of his nature was that of reason.

“I didn’t say that.” He spoke hoarsely. He seemed to say no more because ashamed of his thick utterance.

“But that is what it comes to, Hubert.”

There was nothing of romance about their colloquy—he sitting boorishly; she, without dignity or brightness, standing, as women of the lower classes stand beside their men, wearily, hopelessly parrying words because she could do nothing else. Star had quickness of eye enough to feel it, to feel that he and she were putting on rapidly the stamp of degradation. When he put aside enough of his passion to begin to argue again—angrily, scornfully, but still to argue—she did not gather hope from that. It seemed to her then, and all through the interview, that she might as well not have spoken, that

the words passed her lips only because they were more tolerable than silence. She did not know, poor girl, that, having given the most of her life joyously to what was good, the Good did not now desert her in her hour of need, but impelled her to plead, that at least she might not have the bitter self-reproach, in days that followed, that she had not pleaded with him.

As for him, he argued because his anger was beginning again to take the form of self-assertion.

He had not said that she could do him no good. On the contrary, if she accepted the life he offered her, she would have a very humanizing and civilizing influence upon him. (He had all the phrases of modern journalism on his lips, and all his thought was interwoven with its most vapid arguments.) He was a rough fellow, he knew; she had made him better already. When he had written his advertisement for a wife he had hoped it would attract a girl who would be a valuable accomplice in his schemes. But now he had given up that; he saw it was better for a woman to keep her hands clean of that work. He would rather, now, have a wife who didn't do it. As to giving up the business of thieving, she knew very little of how labour was valued if she supposed any degree of comfort or pleasure could be assured to them by what she called honesty. He was clever—granted; did she suppose that by mere work and ability he could rise in the only business in which he had been able to make a start. She little knew (this with a sneer) the wire-pulling that went on behind a provincial newspaper if she supposed that a man too honest to sell his opinions to a party could rise to a place of any responsibility. He, unable to tell who his father

was, without money and without influence, would be left at the foot of the ladder long before he would be given a chance to get on its steps; but even if the chance came, did she think he wanted it? He was too honest to bow down before the god of Party. There were different ways of thieving she would know if she knew anything of the world, and the editor who bamboozled a herd of men into thinking wrong was right by the flash of rhetoric and a one-sided statement of facts stole from them something much more valuable than money, and did it in a far meaner way than by breaking into their houses at night. He had no respect for the moral value of law which protected the deceits of newspapers and the infamous tricks of trade, the sweating which most capitalists practised in some form or other, and the gambling of rich idlers; such law might have practical utility, but it had no moral force. He thought a thief who risked his life by breaking it was a nobler fellow than men who sneaked behind it to do their thieving.

“Hubert,” she said, “the men who do these things do wrong, but you are doing wrong too.”

“I do what is unlawful.”

‘You do what is wicked.’

“You think it wicked because you have been brought up to think so.”

“All good men think so.”

At that he laughed out. “There was a time when all good men thought the earth stood still. You are behind the time if you wish to bow down to other people’s opinion. That is stale, even in theology. It is the glory of the English race that her sons think for themselves and say, ‘I do what I think right, whatever

any man may say.' That is the cry of the modern hero." Then, with more real thought, he went on, "And it's a very good cry. In other countries you see systems of paternal government by which men are told what to do and what to think, and when they are too ill to work they are decently supported. The result is average torpor. Here a man thinks out his own morals and his own creed, and, if he doesn't support himself and his family, starves like an ownerless dog; on the whole, it produces a better sort of men." He had almost lost his sneer in his eager play of mind; it came back when he remembered his quarrel with her. "So set your mind at rest, my dear; I'm a very model man, doing what I think right in spite of anybody, and I'll give you pocket money by it that you won't get any other way."

"I will tell you what I think," she said. "The man who sets himself up to think differently from the wisest and best men who have lived is very silly."

"That is what *you* think, is it?" He drummed with his foot on the stile. "Have you anything more to say?"

"I am your wife. I shall be far, far happier if you will give back the money you have stolen and never take any more, although we should live in the cheapest, poorest way always. Will you do this to please me?"

"Do that?—no. Why——" He stopped and inflated his breast. "Why, girl, you don't know what you ask. Am I to give up a scheme I have given my life to think out?"

"You are only twenty-five, Hubert."

"What of that? Many a man has put a notch in the world's history before being more than my age; and I tell you, I tell you, Star, by this simple plan of mine of

distracting people's attention I can hoodwink the whole force of law in this country. Men are a simple set of idiots if you set anything uncommon before their eyes and ears and then question them as to what they have seen or heard. Make them look in one direction, you can take anything they possess and run in the other; and next day they'll swear to the most wonderful stories about what never happened."

He was growing eager and confidential though he still spoke in defiant tone. He would have said more; she interrupted him.

"If you will not give back what you have taken and give up stealing, then"—she weighed her words—"I can *never* be at peace with you."

She expected for a moment that he would strike her, so malignant did his attitude become. What he might have done she never knew. Just then a noise startled them, a distant crying like that of a sick child, and it came across the open space from the black of darkness under the sycamore trees of the grove.

The time, the traditions of the place, the crime which, by mysterious means, her husband had so lately committed—these made the sound peculiarly appalling to Star.

Hubert himself seemed startled; he slipped to his feet with an exclamation, looking towards the grove.

Excited as she was, it surprised Star that anything should surprise or alarm him. A child's presence at that place and time betokened evil, and she had grown, in those few miserable days, accustomed to suppose him to be the instigator of all mischief that she would be apt to come in contact with.

Hubert looked inquiringly towards the trees, but

perceived nothing at that distance to satisfy his evident curiosity. He took Star's arm suddenly, clutching it rudely in his strong fingers, and began to push her hastily before him as he walked in the direction of the sounds.

She tried to draw back. Unable to collect her thoughts, she was terrified at the idea of going into the ghostly precinct of the grove. His fingers only tightened with brutal force upon her arm until she screamed faintly with the pain. He was in no mood to relent towards her, but continued to push her on at a rapid pace by his side, lessening only the pain of his grip upon her arm as she walked faster. Without speaking, they tramped, with a quick measured step, up the dewy path which led from the stile, through park and grove, toward the house.

They had not left the moonlight of the open many yards behind before they perceived that the voice of the crying child was receding from them among the trees to the side of the path nearer the high road. As there was no means of communication with the road except by the path they had taken it seemed that whoever was there must have turned aside to hide in the deep covert until the path by the stile should be left free. Hubert stood for a moment considering the sound, and, without further hesitation, began his tramp again over moss, ferns, and raised roots, following the sound straight under the deepest shadow of the trees.

Star had become so wrought up with interest, so excited by Hubert's evident interest, that it seemed to her that they must certainly be upon the brink of some important discovery. Yet, in the few minutes which it

took them to pass under the trees, she could not help observing that their shadow, which had seemed so black, looked at from the open, was, in fact, only lesser light, that she could discern things pretty distinctly in it, and the familiar outline of tree and fern took away from her fear. When they came upon what they sought she felt how foolish her expectation of some mysterious event had been. There stood a poor woman, holding a wailing child in her arms, and Mr. Gower's servant-man stood a few paces from her.

That this woman was the gray-haired beggar whom they all knew Star did not doubt for a moment. She felt shocked to have this positive proof that Gilchrist had clandestine dealings with her. What surprised her was that Hubert was neither shocked nor surprised. He spoke out at once, in a frank, relieved tone, saying respectfully to Gilchrist—

“I did not know you were here, Mr. Gilchrist. We were passing up to the house, and, hearing the youngster we came to see if anything was wrong.” Then he drew Star away back under the trees to the path that led to the house.

“What has he to do with that woman?” gasped Star breathlessly. She was interested in spite of herself.

“I don't know, and I don't care. All I know is that he has something to do with her; he has never made a secret of it.”

Star thought of the cry at the robbery, of the ghost tale belonging to the place, of this child that had apparently nothing to do with either; her thoughts were eager and perplexed; curiosity struggled with the dignity of injured wifeness.

Our life is so complex that majestic Sorrow often wears tawdry garments.

Star felt her curiosity trivial, yet it had come uppermost. She repressed it, and her silence seemed to her sullen and ignoble. She had thought just before that the turning-point of her life had come, that all the future hung on the immediate issue of this quarrel, and now there seemed to be no issue. Mere time has much power to assuage wrath. Since the fierce climax of their quarrel they had been walking arm in arm about ten minutes in the dewy night, and now, as they came onward approaching the terrace and saw, through the framing foliage, soft lights falling through the glass doors upon the entrance steps, they were ready to discuss the question of entering more calmly.

"I do not wish to go in," said Star, "but if you insist, I will go for the sake of peace."

And Hubert answered in his ordinary tone. "Come along; it's not late yet; we will stay a few minutes."

CHAPTER III.

THEIR visit to Miss Gower was not long, nor was it important in any way.

They had no sooner entered the softly lighted hall than Charles Bramwell came toward the door from the drawing-room on his way out. Of the soft light and rich furniture the young doctor seemed a part. Everything in here suggested the strength and glow of the

sunny side of life. What a contrast to the dark wood and sombre figures from which they had come! Star felt dully as if she had been walking in a troubled dream in which the outer works of darkness were enacted. She would gladly have accepted the change to this familiar house-interior as an awakening to reality. But no—the other was her destiny now.

Bramwell seemed in great good humour, and gave them a most friendly greeting as he passed. They were shown into the drawing-room from which they had seen him emerge. It was a long room, and the mistress of the house sat at the other end.

In Star's eyes Miss Gower had never looked so lovely as when she came down that room to greet them. There was a glow of pleasurable excitement upon her sweet face; she seemed to walk on happiness lightly, as a goddess might tread on air. In her rich evening garment, with that glow upon her face, she was a pretty young woman; but if she had not been pretty, if the silver sheen already upon the hair that rolled back softly from her forehead had displayed an uglier track of time than it did, if the roundness of her figure had been less even than it was, and the bloom of the face more completely gone, it would still have seemed to Star that night that no one could see the young man who had gone out and this sweet woman together without perceiving that she was his superior. How could mere youth and health and the good nature that comes of ordinary wit and prosperity compare with the true elegance of mind, the chastened sweetness of soul, that beamed from Marian Gower's gentle face? Now that this love affair which she had been suspecting seemed to have come to pass--

seemed, for to Star's swift thought the circumstances had that seeming—she felt indignant that the young man should get so much and the woman so little. She had not realized before how unequal the union would be. Her heart cried out for justice to her friend who must be her friend no more.

Yet it came upon her in a flash of sad thought, as they trod the soft carpet approaching each other, that if Marian had indeed found this other source of happiness she would hardly notice, perhaps, the breaking of that bond of friendship the severance of which was now breaking her own heart.

Star sat still and let her husband talk. She looked at him with curiosity to see how well he could adapt himself to this drawing-room and its mistress, how well he could talk to her with that simple, quiet manner of his that seemed always to be guided aright by sterling sense rather than by a desire to appear well. It was Hubert's first introduction to Miss Gower's rooms, and a week ago Star's every nerve would have quivered with the small ambition that her husband should produce the best possible impression; now— When we walk at the peril of our lives across rugged mountain districts we feel strangely to remember that we have distressed ourselves at the inequality of some garden path. Hubert played the gentleman very well indeed, as well as any self-taught man could. Marian was evidently pleased with him, but as for Star, if a widow's veil had dropped before her face she could not have seen more dimly, could not have felt further removed from this young husband to whom all her bright young nature had been so loyal only a week before. With the two before her, it

was Miss Gower's voice seemed most to touch the chords of her heart that night, it was toward her that her spirit leaned with an affection which she was determined never again to betray.

She began to notice their talk when Hubert was saying, "We have just been hearing your ghostly child, Miss Gower."

Marian's happy mood, which was that of gaslight and evening dress, suffered evident chill.

Hubert explained. "I don't think it will rob you this time," he laughed. He told what they had just seen.

"Gilchrist with her!" Marian cried. She looked at Star, then at Kent. Her long suspicion of Gilchrist escaped her in spite of discretion. "Do you not think that, considering the circumstances of the robbery, this looks very suspicious?"

She was surprised at the quietude with which each received her question. It is well known that the frivolous and hysterical love the excitement of a mystery, but who does not? When one asks such a question as Marian's about a fellow-creature, there is a fine flavour about life, the vanishing of which does not bring that sense of relief that might be expected. Marian thought it would be a relief to her to know that there was nothing in her suspicion, but she was human.

"For that matter," Star spoke, "we knew long ago that he had something to do with this woman and the child."

"When I first met Gilchrist," said Kent, "before he came to Mr. Gower, he told me he had come from London looking for the poor woman. I happen to know

that since then he has provided a lodging for her in town. He seems to me to be a benevolent and pious person. The woman is old and not strong."

"I told Mrs. Kent once that I had heard the child crying one night long before the burglary." Marian began telling Hubert the incident she had once told Star. "Do you suppose,"—with a little excitement she thus ended—"that it could have been this child I heard then? that Gilchrist could have had the beggar about the house?"

"I should think that a very probable explanation of what you heard," said Hubert; "but I don't *know* anything about it."

"Then of course the child must have been here the night of the theft. It *must* have been the same—and yet I don't know." Her sentence broke off as she recalled the occurrences of that evening—Gilchrist's earnestness; the hoarse, metallic cry.

"The danger of the detective business always is that of jumping to conclusions," said Hubert coolly.

Star did not move uneasily in her easy chair. She wondered at her own composure. She herself had related to Hubert all Miss Gower's innocent confidence concerning this first alarm about the child. She could not doubt now that he had used this knowledge for his own purposes. Yet there he sat, grave and attentive, and Marian was prettily talkative to him for Star's sake. It was very strange! When she listened again their conversation had drifted on.

"As Gilchrist had taken the child once from my mother-in-law I asked him about it. He knows nothing about it; the woman picked it up somewhere," Hubert

was saying. "I should think his word was to be trusted. Why should you doubt him?"

"I—I hardly know. He is so different from other servants."

"Better or worse?"

"Oh, better—much better. He is always doing things for other people as well as his own work; he never seems to consider his position as other servants do; he is willing to do anything for anybody."

Again Star's attention wandered, and again she heard them saying—

"Richarda thought there must be some romance connected with the child."

"I have no doubt there is, Miss Gower, but only the saddest and commonest sort. A child left destitute upon the world is a wailing conundrum. Some people would answer by killing it, and some by putting it in a charitable institution. I don't know which is best. I was such a child myself."

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. Marian looked at him and could not tell whether he spoke in bitterness or jest. Star's expression did not help her; she looked as if she had not heard.

"Surely charity is best."

"Yes, such as my wife's mother would offer to all the kids she sees; but children that are brought up in batches——" He broke off. "I will not trouble you by telling you what I think of it."

"Nay," said Marian; "tell me."

Then Hubert explained what he thought. He spoke out of a deep, life-long indignation, not temperately or wisely, yet, as he spoke, Star could not help feeling

sympathy with him. His interest could hardly be self-interest, and yet—and yet—he was a thief! Was his talk, his interest, his indignation on the children's account, all put on? Or was his thieving a wild fantastic mania, not a part of himself? Then she remembered his cruel grip of her arm and the bad words he had uttered a few minutes before. Her arm still ached.

“Whenever children are brought up on public money,” said Hubert, “there is, as far as I know, a matron, and a committee to see that she does her duty, or what is equivalent to that. Who is the matron? Take the best mother who ever lived, and set her to bring up her family in obedience to the dictates of a dozen self-important aunts and uncles, who visit frequently and are at liberty to criticize and alter whatever they please, and tell her to keep her house open for an hour or two every week that the public may go through and write letters about it to the newspapers—how do you think it would work?” He paused a moment, letting his question sink into her mind. “Would that be a position that any true mother on this earth would choose?”

“No,” said Marian, wonderingly, “I think not.”

“No; and the women who choose to hold that position toward other people's children are shallow, or callous, or base, or a mixture of all three. But, whatever their character may be, they and the children must live a life in which the look of things is everything, for it is by the look of things they are judged, and all that is mean in human nature is developed by it. You can't mend the matter. Give the matron more power and ten to one she

abuses it. All I say is this—take the most motherly woman in the world, she can't fill the position as it is; alter the position, and you run the risk of getting the worst women in the world into it. The system is bad."

"But you, Mr. Kent—you have come out of the ordeal unscathed." Marian smiled. Her tone suggested that he must exaggerate the evil. "You are a contradiction to your words."

Hubert laughed, and, on the whole, his laugh was self-satisfied.

"They didn't take me off the streets till I was six, and the Jesuits say that the first six years are final, so my sins and virtues need not be set down to charity. But I tell you, Miss Gower, one thing that saved me from being a knave was the honest indignation that was roused in me every day at the Orphanage. The rich folks had given their money to buy the satisfaction of feeling charitable. How they enjoyed their purchase! And the machine they were so busy oiling and polishing was grinding out dullards and sneaks. I fought for the dullards, and worked off my badness that way, and I resolved that I would fight against the class that patronized us; and I'll do it as long as I live. I'd rather stand to-day before the world with Montagu the lamp-lighter as my friend than go dining with any of the managers of that Orphanage."

Marian's hands dropped on her lap. Her pretty eyes looked absently upon the floor. She was not disposed to feel offended.

"It is very sad," she said; "very sad, Mr. Kent."

"It is only what *I* think," he said, relapsing into coolness. "You asked me. Others may think differently."

“When I subscribe to the Orphanage I think that I am doing a good thing. How can I do better?”

“*I don't know. The time will come, I suppose, when the world will be so educated that there will be no unfortunate children. Till then it must struggle on as best it can.*”

They two had more talk, and then Star essayed to give Miss Gower Tod's message. She made no softening comment; she repeated the words baldly. Coming from the blank weariness of her expression they lacked even the little eloquence and pathos his condition had given them. Yet it did not occur to her that she had not been faithful to her trust.

CHAPTER IV.

LEFT to herself, Marian sat lost in a rosy dream. She took up again the mood in which her last visitors had found her. She forgot, for the moment, Star's weary face or any other subject of uneasiness the visit had brought before her.

Bramwell had not proposed marriage—no, he had done nothing of that kind, for every one knows that there are many kindred things which may be put forth as premonitions of the final act. Star's suspicion was wrong if she suspected that he had committed himself thus. Yet he had called on Marian only to discuss the next winter's series of entertainments at “Babbits,” a subject which was not actually pressing in August,

and he had remained somewhat longer than the discussion required. His manner, moreover, had been singularly pleasant, singularly kind. Therefore Marian had that happy dream which had for rational base some such considerations as these—that she had not expected or desired this man's admiration, yet it seemed to be given; that it is the unexpected that happens; that such attachments defy probability; and then, there was the fortune she would inherit! Marian had so lowly an opinion of herself that it seemed to her no insult if that were added to the sum of her attractions. The dream, tempered by the wisdom and moderation of forty years, was still sweet.

It is a pity to relate such dreams or their interpretation.

Gilchrist soon came into the room. He came and stood not far from Marian.

“I would like to ask you,” he said, “what you think would be the best thing to do with a young child whose parents are gone away and not to be found, and which is now ailing and in the hands of some one who is not able to take care of it very well.”

Marian felt that the mystery which had been like a pet grievance to her was vanishing, so matter-of-fact was his tone.

“There is the Infants' Home,” she said.

“I had it there for a few days when I took it from Mrs. Thompson. Perhaps Mrs. Thompson has told you that she befriended the child at one time?”

“She told me the wretched woman was too drunk to hold the child in her arms, and when it was left you came and took it without explanation.”

"Just so. I put it in the Home then, but she discovered where it was and claimed it again. I don't know that they would take the child back again, even if that were the best thing that could be done with it."

"Who is this poor woman?"

"She is my sister—or, at least, my half-sister; her mother was not mine."

"It is hardly the thing to have her on the streets like that."

"I have tried to make her give up that sort of life. I can't control her. It is the love of drink that is her temptation now."

"Can she not be put in some asylum? There are places where——"

"I have put her in several such places. She will not stay. I have no power to make her stay. The only thing I can do now is to watch over her as well as I can."

He did not disagree with any comment Marian made upon the beggar whose affairs they were discussing, but there was all the difference between love and apathy, between the attitude of heaven and that of earth, in the tones they used. Marian had spoken callously, with perhaps a tinge of indignant scorn. They both felt the difference. She softened a little.

"This must be a great trial to you," she said.

He did not reply but said, "It seems that this child was taken from a family she met tramping on the road when she came here from London. I have made every inquiry, but I can find no trace of the parents."

"Did you come here, then, at the same time she did?" Marian began to feel curious.

“I came to look after her. I can see that she has lodging and food. I do not see that to restrain her against her will is of real help to her or any one. It is often thought good, but I have come to believe it is no real good. It is not God’s way with us.”

There was sometimes a little gap between one sentence and another in his speeches. He seldom used the small connecting words by which most people oil the joints of their talk.

“And you came here for the purpose of watching over her?” Marian said again. She felt puzzled “You must have had a home and occupation elsewhere?”

“For a good many years I have moved from place to place where she went, by taking a situation in some family. I can always pick up a living that is enough for her too.”

“Surely that is an exaggerated idea of duty?”

“You could not let any one you had loved go about in that way, and leave them to themselves and to all that might befall them.”

He spoke with such confidence that, for a moment, she felt convinced too; yet she argued.

“If any one had spoiled my life, as she must have spoiled yours, I think I would go as far as I could from them.”

“I do not think you would if you could help them.”

“But you can do so little to help her.”

He passed his hand across his brow. “Almost nothing. Still she might need my help at any time. Her right mind might come to her, and she would turn to me then for the help she will not have now”

“And in the faint hope of that you spoil your own life?”

“Oh no; we find our lives by losing them, you know. Life is full of work and happiness. It would be wrong to let one shadow darken one’s life.”

She did not answer. She felt much confused. He looked down at her.

“I am not unhappy here,” he said. He seemed to be giving her some information which he wished her to know and comprehend, and Marian, who for months had been chafing at her uncle’s extraordinary indulgence to this man, felt puzzled to know why he should tell her that he was not unhappy with them.

“You were not brought up to be a servant?”

“I was a Baptist minister. You do not know much about dissenting bodies perhaps. There are many ministers who come of poor parents and who do not receive very much education before they are ordained.”

“Still,” she stammered, “the position.”

She blushed. All her conduct toward this man, all her thoughts of him, seemed to have been wrong and foolish. She had just that morbid, sensitive mind that overrates the wrong of its own follies.

He was not looking at her. He clasped his hands behind him in the absent manner not uncommon to him. He spoke with visionary look.

“Where I last lived as a minister my poor sister came to live with me. I knew her life had not been right, but she was then homeless, so I got her to be mistress of my house. The people to whom I preached would not have that; it was a scandal to them. It

did not matter much, as far as she was concerned, for she would not stay with me any way. She was still young and handsome then. She went away with an unprincipled man. It was this way with me then: I had been pastor to those people for eight years, and they were still so unspiritual as to place outward respectability before the desire to save. I had been trying to bring salvation to many; real result I could not estimate—perhaps there was little or none. I thought I would try to go after the one sheep I knew was lost, and be sure that it was found before I tried again to benefit many. I gave up my position there and went to seek my poor sister. I went full of hope. It seemed an easy thing to save *one* life if I was willing to give my life till it was done.” He stopped a moment. “That was twelve years ago.” Again he paused. “I have learned that it is of no use to try to save people unless we give *ourselves* to them. You think I have been foolish to give so many years to follow and help her. Jesus Christ gave nearly all the time of His ministry to a few disciples.”

He went on again in a minute. “I believe I shall still prevail, Miss Gower; but I am troubled about this child. She took it first because she liked it, and it aided her in begging. She has shown love for it, and I hoped she might begin to do right. Now it is ill, and as she does not seem able to keep it well, it seems murder to leave it with her.” In a few moments he said again, “I wish that I need not take the child from her.”

He spoke with such strong wistfulness that she, hardly deciding yet whether to think him mad or heroic, could not help inquiring further into the cause of his

desire and hope. It seemed to her that he wanted something from her.

“Tell me about your sister,” she said gently enough.

“When she was young we lived in London. She was good looking. She was religiously brought up, but I think she did not inherit good impulses from her mother. We were not in prosperous circumstances, and marriage was the object of her life. She expected the man she married to supply her with pleasures. She fell in with a young gentleman—an inexperienced boy. He ought not to have thought of anything but business or study, but he thought of her, and she married him. She ran from us. I was young at the time and did not understand it. Her husband had good intentions. He could not tell his friends of this marriage, but they had already got him a place in India, with a salary that sounded more to him than it was. He meant to go out and send money to support his wife till the first child came, and then to send for her to come out to him. I think he tried to do this; I think he lived poor and worked hard and sent her all he could. What I am telling you is not what either has said, but this seems to have been the truth.”

The echo of family hints and suspicions came to her mind as it had come before. “Can you be speaking of my uncle?” she said.

“Yes.”

“How can you—how can you endure to be in the same house with him if he deserted her?” She broke off.

“If he had ruined her life I could not, but it was the other way—she ruined his.”

“Ruined it!”

“Yes—for all good uses; for he loved her and trusted her, and she railed at him for not sending her more money, and when the baby was born and dead she wrote to him that it was his fault. Then she ceased to write to him, and his letters were returned by a man called Curtis. She left London with Curtis.”

“And my uncle?”

“He was young, you know; he had feeling, and she killed it. He does not seem to have made any remonstrance. What could he do in India? I think he had really tried to do right before that, but after——”

Neither spoke for some minutes.

“She lived with Curtis some years,” he went on. “After that she came to me. She was only weak and pleasure-loving; that is her character, but it led her into as great evil as the worst disposition. After she left me the second time her life fell very low, for she began drinking too much. I tried living with her, but it is hard for a man trained to no trade to get work to support a home. Then, too, when I tried to restrain her by force it made her hate me.”

“I do not understand why she came here, or you.”

“Mr. Gower had lost sight of his wife entirely. He did not know whether she was dead or alive, but she, by some curious chance, saw his name in a newspaper and saw that he had come to live here. We were both in London then. She could get no money to travel, so she set off walking. It was some weeks before I could find out where she had gone or why. I thought I should find her somewhere on the road; I did not think she would get so far. But she held to her purpose and got here before me. The only safeguard for her is to get her a

room wherever she is, and have her supplied with food every day. The worst thing that can befall her is to get money or anything she can sell."

"But she never came to my uncle; she never made herself known to him."

"Her poor mind is dull with drinking. She lacks purpose and courage to carry out any intention, and I don't know whether she ever had any definite intention of making herself known to him. She was tired of London, so she wandered to the place she heard he was in. It is impossible to know what passes in a poor, dull brain like hers. But if she ever intended to beg of him I came in time to prevent his giving her money. That is what he would have done, and I had a right to forbid him."

"He would never have done anything more than that," Marian burst out, with a sudden sense of contrast. "He would never have spoken a kind word to her or given her true advice or seen that she was housed and fed."

"He did more than you would perhaps have expected from him. When I told him, he did not call me a fool."

"Did he not?" It was actually the first good thing she had heard of her uncle.

"He did more than I asked. He gave me my present work, and leisure with it to look after her. I could not have found a situation easily in a town where I was not known."

"And by this generosity secured to himself the best servant he has ever had."

"If it is so—and it would be a pity if a man who has

had some education could not be a better servant than men who have had less—he did not expect that when he engaged me. I *think* he acted from a better impulse than self-interest.”

He stopped here as if he had said some very interesting and important thing.

“I hope he did,” said Marian wearily. “When I came to my uncle I came with high hopes of influencing his way of life.” A pause, and then she went on, “And you speak as if it were hopeful that he should have offered you a situation to wait on him. He ought to have been only too glad to have supplied you with means for your”—she was going to say, “noble work,” but she said—“effort to rescue her.” It was all so new to her that she could not yet feel quite sure whether this man was wise or unwise.

“You wrong him. He would, no doubt, have much preferred to give me a large sum of money to have got rid of me and of her. I wouldn’t take money, and he was not unkind enough to offer it, which, for a gentleman of his stamp, was something, and showed a warmer heart than he usually shows. I told him I was looking for a situation as servant. He did the most he could do by making room for me in his own house. It was the only thing he could do for me, the best thing that he could do for her through me, and I was glad for his sake to come; I thought I might help him.”

“Why do you choose this manner of life?”

“As I said, it was very difficult to find work I was fit for. In this line of life one can——” He hesitated a moment, and she thought he was going to say, “do much good,” but he did not. “I have found it a very beautiful

kind of life," he said, and in a minute he recited quietly, " 'If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet.' "

Marian felt uncomfortable. "But the child?" she said. "Can you find no trace of the parents?"

He went on to explain that he did not believe the parents would ever claim the child. "Such children," he said, "are murdered by mothers every day, simply because they are in the way."

Marian exclaimed.

"You do not believe that. Neither would I have believed it once—in the days when I preached to people's souls, and saw only the outside of their lives. I have gone down into the depth in following this poor woman."

Marian could not speak; she was full of conflicting thought. The happy little dream to which she had been giving up her whole soul a few minutes ago seemed a flimsy thing and already overlaid with terrible reality.

"I have not told you this story before, Miss Gower, because I wanted your help so much that I hesitated to ask it."

"What can I do?" she said despondently.

"I do not know, but a woman must know better how to deal with a woman and a child than a man can. I think my poor sister will not live many years longer. I should like to draw her to good ways through the child while she lives. I should like to see some good provision made for the child while she lives, and after, for it would not be right to sacrifice its good to hers. Mrs. Thompson is dying," he went on. "My poor sister blesses her name when she speaks of her. Mrs.

Thompson could have done much for her, but she will soon be gone. If you could learn the secret of her influence, you have wealth and leisure, and I am able to tell her story to you, while to others, since I have taken this situation, I have not even wished to say that she is my sister; for there are men living who know the maiden name of Mr. Gower's wife, and I owe it to him that no one should suspect through me that his wife is alive. It is only to you I can look for help, Miss Gower. You are a good woman. Will you think it over? Will you find out what you can do, and do it? I cannot rescue her alone; will you help me?"

His whole heart was in the words; he was addressing her with passionate eagerness. The words, "You are a good woman," rang in her ears long after he had uttered them. She stood up to answer him, and, standing there, in her light, costly dress, under the chandelier, her mind reverted lightly to compliments which Bramwell paid her there two hours before. So many new ideas about persons and things surged within her that they and she herself seemed unreal, but this was real—that this servantman was entreating her, she felt his entreaty oppressive.

"I will do all that I can."

The conventional promise came easily to her lips. Its aim was to rid herself of him. In that it succeeded, for he left her at once.

CHAPTER V.

THAT night Marian tossed on her bed. Waking or sleeping, her promise, made so lightly, repeated itself over and over—"I will do all that I can." He had not asked her for so much, yet this was what she had pledged herself to. In the face of all that he had done, how had she dared to say the words? The question she was grappling with was not so much what she could do, as what could she not do, in effort, if not in success, if she tried as he had tried. She shuddered to look into the abyss of such unlimited endeavour.

She thought of this man Gilchrist: his sacrifice, that seemed not so much in the telling, grew and grew as she looked at it in the reality, and when she thought of matching her own to it in extent it assumed hideous proportions. And yet this man had claimed, not so much in words as by his mien and habit of life, to have found something that more than compensated for what he had given up.

She thought of her uncle. She remembered how, months ago, he had said earnestly of Gilchrist, "He is more in his right mind than I." Nothing that she had ever done had won from him a thought of his own selfishness. Since then Gilchrist, content with small service, had manifestly grown in favour. Some glimmer of the higher, the selfless life must have entered into the dark mind with this influence, must grow as long as that influence remained.

Yet the question came to her—was it worth the cost? The whole of this man's time, service, thought, and prayer was being given in the effort to shift the drunken, degraded wife and the rich man besotted in selfishness from the downward to the upward track. It was all that even Heaven through him could do, perhaps, to set them on the beginning of self-denial in this world. Was it worth what he was giving, what she herself must give, if she set her seal to the hackneyed form of promise? Marian's faith in all goodness and all effort reeled in her endeavour to estimate comparative values; but when she ceased her attempt to compute and compare the worth of what was devoted and the worth of the gain desired, her faith steadied itself and answered, "What is devoted is measured; the gain is without measure."

With morning the other interests of her life reasserted themselves. Not knowing precisely what to do or think about her new obligation, she gladly let the tumult of her mind subside into the large intention to do what she ought, and was glad also to postpone on any pretence the definition of this duty. A happy thought came to her; she would ask Bramwell's advice concerning the ailing child on the first opportunity, and decide nothing till she saw what he should suggest.

An excuse for a talk with the young doctor was pleasant, she hardly knew how pleasant. It was largely because Marian did not like men and was unaccustomed to them that this one man, having won her liking, appeared to her, for the time, more separated from others, more like a fabled hero or young god, than he really was.

It was not many days before he called on Mr. Gower.

It was in the morning. Marian waited and waylaid him on his return downstairs.

She stood just inside the door of a long dining parlour. The severe furniture and heavy curtains, drawn to keep out the sun, made a good background to the lady's slight figure in summer dress. She felt a little timid at accosting him, and Bramwell looked down at her very kindly.

She wasted no words. "There is a poor woman," she began, "who has a baby in her charge. The parents have deserted it. The child is not thriving." She went on telling what was not personal—that the care of the child was an incentive to steadiness in the woman, that it was feared that if the child was put in a hospital or "home" she would sink to a lower way of life.

Bramwell shook his head. "A hard case," he said. "She ought to take it to the Dispensary on Tuesdays. I would offer to see it, of course, as you take an interest in it; but, really, she will get as good advice at the Dispensary."

She told him, with the beginning of a feeling of weariness, that the child had been taken to the Dispensary, that it was feared the woman could not remember to carry out the directions she received.

"I am afraid I can't advise you," he said. "It's a common case. Such children die by the thousand."

"I am sure I don't know what to do," said Marian. "You saw the child once in that poor Mrs. Thompson's room."

"Oh, I think I recollect. It was a very fine child—looked as if it had a good constitution. It's a pity to let such a sturdy boy pine. Why don't you adopt it, Miss

Gower?’ He spoke laughingly, of course. “If its parents are really completely lost to it I should almost feel tempted to adopt it, if I were you.”

“I had not thought of that,” said Marian quietly. The sun, that had been shining in brick-red chinks of the curtains, did not retire and leave the room gray, yet Marian, looking into it as she had looked before Bramwell spoke, felt that its colour seemed less warm and rich. She knew now that Bramwell had not thought of marrying her. “It would not obviate the difficulty of having to take it from the woman.”

“Unless, like Pharaoh’s daughter, you let her take care of it,” he said, and smiled down at her a very bright kindly smile, as if in apology for his jest, in which there had been flavour of earnestness. “Indeed, I am afraid you will perceive that I have no advice worth anything.”

He took his leave then, in his own good-natured way. Marian stood a few minutes till his trap had gone down the avenue. Then she went out in her garden hat, and wandered aimlessly round the terrace surrounding the house.

It stood somewhat grim, with its big, echoing, four-square walls, just as she had seen and disliked it when, in the loneliness of her arrival, she had heard first the story of the haunting. The trees, that then had rattled their branches like bare bones, were dense now with leaves. Some stretched their boughs near the house, so that the light that fell on the gray stone seemed itself green. Marian walked all round, past the kitchen and outhouses, to a bit where the lawn skirted blank wall, and then came to the long glass houses that separated her from the laurels under her own window. She looked

into the conservatory. No plants had been put in it; it was utterly bare, and its bareness suited her mood. She went in and sauntered through it. Dusty and blank was this place which imagination furnished so naturally with exquisite grouping of flower and palm. Marian felt her life akin to the place and sat down on a stool that happened to stand there.

It was a queer place to sit in. She had been alone there half an hour when she started to hear the door at the other end open. Gilchrist came through in a hurried manner before she could get away or even rise and pretend she had not been sitting there.

He had something in his hand in which he seemed more interested than in Marian's choice of a resting-place.

"Look!" he said.

It appeared to her to be a small machine, very old and rusted. She gazed at it with ignorant eyes, surprised that he seemed excited.

"Isn't it part of a clock?"

"That's clockwork," he said, pointing to part of it; "and this thing, with valves that open and shut, is, unless I am very much mistaken, the thing that made the noise like a child's cry the night we were robbed."

She looked at it incredulously.

He was growing more calm. "I make no doubt this was it. I can't make it give a sound now, but it's been in the pipe that runs down the side of the wall, and of course the first rain spoiled it. The water ran through the machine at first, but lately it has got clogged and choked the pipe. That is the way we found it."

"Are you sure?" she asked in dazed fashion. "Are you sure this could have deluded us so?"

“A length of the pipe had been taken out and this put in, and the pipe put together again behind the laurels. The pipe is a thin one, and the metal would carry the sound so that we never knew exactly where it was. It is wonderfully ingenious. See how it's muffled with this rag to make the sound soft. It is not long since there was something in the paper about the toy factory at Croom. It is said to be celebrated for its imitation of the noises of animals and children. It looks as if the fellow who did this was some workman from a place where he would learn such things. It would evidently go for a certain time when wound up and then stop, as many of those toys do.”

Then she raised her eyes and looked at him. “You have really no idea who did it? You suspect no one?”

“I can't even find any clue to a reasonable suspicion.”

And, as he said this, Marian knew that he had read her suspicion of him—read it and forgiven it completely.

“These wires and valves are so rusted,” he said, “that I doubt if it could be proved that they were made at that factory, even if they are worked on the same principle.” He went on talking. “I am going now to show it to Mr. Gower. He always believed that—my poor sister had in some way had the child here. It is natural that he should have a morbid fear of her coming about and perhaps talking to the servants alone. I have always thought that the thief may have known Mr. Gower was likely to fear her, even if he didn't fear the ghost tale. The thief may have counted on one or the other—or both, if he knew of them.”

Marian made some inane reply. She had been in-

terested to know what Gilchrist surmised about the theft; she felt little interest just then concerning the theft itself. He was about to move away, but, as he had mentioned his sister, she felt constrained to detain him and ask if he had seen her again. She spoke looking straight before her. She felt conscience-stricken that three days had elapsed and she had done nothing.

"I wanted to tell you," he said, "that I am sure Mr. Gower will not object to your helping my sister Silvia, or should you wish to make some arrangement for the child afterwards."

"How do you know?"

"He will ignore what you do, but he will not hinder. His heart is larger than you think."

She did not ask him again how he knew. It seemed little to rejoice in, yet she felt glad, for her uncle's sake, that he could affirm this.

Then she said feverishly, "I may as well begin at once; I may as well begin to-day to take care of your poor sister and the child."

"Have you any plan?"

"No," she answered. How little she had tried to think out any plan!

"You see," he said diffidently, "one must just try one thing and then another, and hope that at last some way may help her a little. She won't be grateful for anything you do, Miss Gower, and she won't fall in easily with any plan we try." He was speaking again with quiet passion, forgetting himself and all his surroundings. He stood looking down at her, his broad face lit with feeling, his hands behind him. "She's no more anxious to be made respectable than the world was to be

saved when God's Son 'came unto His own, and His own received Him not.' She won't like our helping her, any more than we like it when God, with His angel of circumstance, stops us walking in one path and turns us into another. And if you should charge yourself with the bringing up of this child, do what you will for it, it's more than likely that it won't be a pride and a pleasure to you when it grows to be a lad and man, any more than we, growing in the Christian life, are much of a pride to the Master who is training us. We bring shame on His Name often, and this boy will, like enough, do the same to you. The question is, will they be a bit better for our help than they would have been without it? And what would we be if God deserted us?"

Marian sat on her stool, her eyes dropped, her cheeks pale.

And thus he left her in the flower-house in which there were no flowers.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. THOMPSON still lay suffering. Dust and heat were upon the high road, and the drought of lingering summer upon the fields around.

The dying woman, so far away from every scene in which her eyes had been wont to delight, lay peacefully in an upper room of Hubert Kent's cottage, folded her hands each day and thanked God that He had provided so good a place for her and her children.

Into this back room Star, with a reckless indifference to her own comfort, brought everything from the other parts of the house which could give rest or pleasure. Here, while her mother was tended by Richarda's constant watchfulness, Star would come, leaving household work half done, and sit for hours at a time, talking softly of all that was good and cheerful, telling trivial news of the children in the street, of the new baby which had come two doors off, and of the mother's well-doing. The dying woman could laugh gently with Richarda at the humorous side of these incidents, could grieve at the troubles of little children, could form earnest wishes and breathe prayers for their good. So of all the interests of the many-sided life which came before her Star talked, and they three laughed and sighed together. Of sacred things, discussed at such times by people who depend for comfort in death upon a mental frame or transient mood, they did not talk very much; and of her own misery, of the future which stared her in the face with ceaseless interrogation and no hope, Star never spoke.

Into her mother's room, to which Star had carried all the brightness of his house, Hubert did not enter. Every day, when her mother would ask for him, Star had her excuse: Hubert had gone to town early, or he had come home late, or he was tired.

"Ah, well," thought the mother-in-law sadly, "he does not want to come." And in her humility she felt it but natural that the young man should find no attraction at her bedside.

Yet Hubert had asked to come more than once, until Star had hurt his sensitive vanity by letting him think

that he was not wanted. It never occurred to her that there was duplicity in this. There are times when we are so bent on attaining a goal that we never notice the path we take, and Star flung down her honesty, as she would have as willingly flung down her life, at the door of her mother's dying chamber, to prevent the entrance of a desecrating footstep.

Thus some days went by, till, on a Sunday afternoon, when the western window was full of slant sunbeams, the hour of death came. It came, as it seemed to them, unexpectedly, though they had done little but expect for many days. It was that lazy time on a summer Sunday afternoon when all the world seems sleepy, and it would seem that death itself ought not to walk abroad. Star sat by her mother's pillows, the dear hand clasped in her own. With no apprehension of immediate danger, she had leaned back her head, and her young eyes, heavy with healthy sleep, had dropped their lids. Richarda sat at the window, singing hymns softly, her dreamy voice rippling over old-fashioned trills and turns with the half-mechanical ease of long habit. It was just then that Mrs. Thompson stirred from her sleep, and they, looking up, knew that death was very near.

They had no doctor and no priest. They knew no use for either.

"Mother, oh, mother," said Star, bending over, "can you look at us? can you speak to us, mother?"

For answer the old smile came brightly, and the faded, gray eyes were opened wide, showing clear depths of motherly tenderness. The heart of flesh might have almost ceased to beat, but the heart of the spirit, the mother's love, was strong to hear the daughter's cry.

It came to Star then—the sin against Hubert which she had committed. Her heart did not soften toward him, but she felt that something she might have done towards her husband's reformation had not been done; now she was panic-stricken in the hope that it might not yet be too late.

“Mother, mother”—she sank on her knees—“mother, if I bring Hubert will you say something to him? Oh, mother, Hubert is not good; he does not believe in God and heaven; he does not try to be good. Can you say something? He may believe it if you say it now.” Indistinct ideas, associated with death-bed scenes, were floating in her half-frenzied mind. “If I bring him will you try to say something to warn him, something to show him how wrong it is to do wrong?” she besought incoherently. “Can you try, will you try, mother?”

She looked to see her mother's unfailing pity greet this first hint of her marriage tragedy, but it was scarcely pity that was in the dying eyes—not, at least, what we call pity. There was rest and comfort in the glance that met hers, as the glance of an angel, who might say, “It matters little that we are feeble to cope with sin. God is great.”

“I will try,” said the mother gently.

The voice reassured her; it was her own mother's voice—her mother who had never failed her.

Star dashed downstairs, to find Hubert lounging with a novel in the deserted parlour.

“Come up,” she commanded peremptorily. “Mother is—is dying.”

Hubert rose up, looking, as he felt, shocked.

“Come up.” She jerked out the words in an agony of impatience.

“I? Oh—what can I do, Star? I am very sorry, but I can’t do anything upstairs. I’ll go for Bramwell.”

At any time in the previous days he would have been very glad, for the seemliness of the thing, to have gone in and bid his mother-in-law good night or good morning, but he had strongly the natural dislike to seeing any one die; and besides, he had heard Richarda singing hymns. The two ideas of religion and death formed a picture in his fancy most repulsive.

But Star could be imperious, and Hubert was too humane to oppose her violently just then. She hustled him upstairs and into the room.

It is the lot of man to form an incorrect notion of anything of which he is ignorant. Hubert had been shut out from this chamber, and he supposed it to be filled with gloom, or, at least, with a sickly religious atmosphere which would seem to him gloom. When he stood within the door he was quite unprepared for the flood of sunshine there. Richarda smiled as she spoke low words. He stood for a moment as if he had come out of darkness and his eyes were dazzled.

Star sank again by her mother. “Oh, mother, mother, speak to Hubert. Don’t go without speaking to him. Teach him something; try to teach him.”

So, as Hubert came nearer, his wife’s mother turned to him. Perhaps her failing mind had forgotten Star’s entreaty; perhaps her natural shyness triumphed over her effort to fulfil it; or, again, it may have been that seeing him for the first time after so many days she could only contemplate his goodness, for eyes that are

very pure see virtue more quickly than sin. Whatever the immediate cause, then, as before, there was a deeper wisdom in her than that which she could have reasoned, and when Star clasped her hand over his she looked to him only with the familiar smile with which she had greeted him many a morning and evening—only an old woman's smile, but it was full of love and light.

“God bless you, my son. You have been very good to me and mine. God will repay you.”

“Oh, mother!” sobbed Star, in agony almost of reproach.

Some troubled look came over the dying face, as if she tried to recall something she had left undone; then the loving smile was given again, as though she would ask Hubert to let the affection with which she regarded him atone for something she could not remember. Her last loving look, the last pressure of her hand, were for him. Before she could turn her eyes again to her daughters the soul had died out of them; her breath became laboured; in a little while she was dead.

Hubert stood awkward, irresolute, feeling the natural desire to do something suitable and kind. He saw Richarda stand calm, hanging on her crutches, her sharp-featured face touched into contemplative tenderness. Star, with more healthy impulse, knelt burying her sobs in the lifeless breast. The evening sunlight lit the room just as if death had not been there, and ineffable peace spread itself over the face of the dead. Hubert slunk away. He was fully aware that he went out of that presence-chamber with no dignity, real or apparent. Richarda had looked to him to lift up his wife, but he slunk away.

“Oh, mother, mother,” sobbed Star, when she had persuaded Richarda to leave her alone with the dead,—“oh, mother, mother, I am glad you are dead—glad, glad, glad; yes, darling, glad.” All the passion of her long-pent-up sorrow seemed to find vent in the trembling whisper of the words, “glad, my darling, glad, glad.”

There is great comfort in tears. When the evening planet darted its fair, uncertain ray in upon her as she, still weeping, performed the last service for her mother, she was stronger than she had been for many days.

“We cannot stop spending the money until mother dies,” she had said to herself. She had despised herself for this degree of dishonesty, but had not had the courage to mar the last precious days of that dear life on earth. Now she knew without doubting that that life was best honoured by the apparent dishonour of a mean burial. Richarda might think her mad; Hubert might oppose his strength to hers; she felt strong to brave them both, determined that not one unnecessary farthing should be spent on the rites of this death.

Over the dark fields in the quivering depth of distant blue—blue such as is seen in harebell flowers—the planet of love grew brighter, till its clear, gold light beamed steadily into the open window, where, in the calm twilight, Star sat a little while by the corpse she had washed and dressed. All her tears were shed, and there was a new prayer in her heart which seemed to give birth to a new life. Hitherto her aim had been the happiness of love, happiness for those she loved more than for herself, but still, happiness. For a few days there had been the cessation of all aim in the despair of

defeat. Now arose a new aim—not joy, but righteousness. A true life goes through many such changes, and that which makes each real and vivid is that, when it comes, it seems the final stronghold, the consummation of experience.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN Star came down she confronted the undertaker whom Hubert had brought. He spoke soothingly, with that upward inflection of tone which one uses to spoiled children. It was evidently his habit to speak thus to mourners. Hubert also spoke caressingly, as if reasonableness could not be expected from her and her fancies must be humoured. Star took advantage of their intended indulgence. In vain they affected to misunderstand her directions or gently to set aside her wishes. She gave her orders with an intensity of determination that they found it impossible to gainsay. The glib undertaker was silenced; even Hubert shrugged his shoulders at last and turned away.

When the man was gone it was their usual hour for bed. Star went about putting out lights, and closing the house. She had no other thought than that they should sleep as usual. Her mother had never less need of lights and watching than now.

“Shall I put this out?” she said to Hubert, her hand upon the screw of the parlour lamp.

He had not spoken to or looked at her since she had

crossed his wishes with respect to the undertaker's order. He turned now, looking up from a newspaper which lay untidily on the table.

“No,” he answered; “I will stay here.”

She did not question him further. She went upstairs, undressed, and lay down. Richarda had already fallen into exhausted sleep. Star also went to sleep, but her slumber was light and easily broken. She did not know how long it was—it might have been an hour, it might have been hours—when she awoke, hearing an almost noiseless step upon the stair. She saw a beam of light coming through the crack of the door, which moved, showing that a candle was carried past.

No doubt Hubert was coming to bed. No; he walked as if he did not want to be heard, and his steps paused at her mother's door. She heard him go in and shut it again. What could he have gone there for? She started half up, disposed to go at once and show that she resented his intrusion in that holy place. But a second thought detained her again—perhaps he had gone to see that all was right before he slept, or rain might have come on, and he had gone to adjust the window.

She rested on her elbow, listening to hear him come out again. There was no further sound. At first she chid herself for impatience, for, having no means of measuring time, she supposed that what seemed long to her might, in reality, be but a minute; then, when that could no longer satisfy, it seemed in the silence and darkness almost more easy to count what she had heard a dream than to suppose that Hubert could have gone there to remain. Could he (horrid thought) know of anything in her mother's possession that it was worth

his while to steal? or for his evil purposes could he have any use for what might be learned or stolen from a corpse? An awful, unreasoning fear of his wickedness came over her and, conflicting with it, the supposition that she might not really have heard him enter.

With the indecision of exhausted nerves, she halted long. The night seemed at its deadest. There was no breath nor rustle to recall her excited fancy to reality. At length, trembling with fear, half of supernatural horror, half of unnatural iniquity, she dragged herself to her mother's door and opened it.

Whatever we may expect, that which we see at any given time is usually that which is most natural. The room in its profound repose was just as she had left it. The stars and the infinite sky of night looked in through the open upper part of the window upon the dark room and the white bed. The only change was that a candle (she noticed it was the kitchen candle) was set, shaded from the room and the window, so that its ray fell on the bed, and Hubert, with the face cloth in his hand, stood with folded arms gazing at the mother's face.

He glanced at Star as she stood in the door, but did not seem to care to move, his glance falling back again where it was before.

She never scanned her husband so keenly as at that moment, yet she gained little. He stood with arms crossed, his sensitive face bent forward slightly. He looked profoundly interested, profoundly contemplative, even curious. She could not read the slightest trace of sinister design or troubled emotion. Her eyes were irresistibly drawn from him to the dead face that he

was looking at, as though her mind were compelled by his. On the pillow lay the dear face which age and pain had sculptured with their eternal genius. The face bore no traces of their work to which these two young creatures had not been accustomed while it had been lit by the smile of life; but now that it lay in death there was something new in it beyond the absence of life, something that another Artist had added, a peace that was beyond all description, a strange beauty that seemed almost to shed light.

“Star, I never saw anything like this.” Hubert spoke, forgetting all cause of difference between them, spoke slowly, as if he must speak and as if it were natural that he and she should stand there together and exchange solemn words.

Star could not forget. She came in, looking un-beautiful, as even young and pretty women will look when the face is disordered by weeping and a disordered nightgown is half hidden in an old shawl. She took the candle and took him by the arm, and brought them both out of the room.

“What is the matter?” asked Hubert, yielding in his surprise. “Is Richarda ill? Speak—tell me.”

Star, shutting the door close behind her, was speechless with excess of feeling. She made only a gesture towards him of such indignation that his face darkened.

“Do you mean,” he asked in the simplicity of surprise, “that I am not good enough to go there?”

“Yes.”

She left him alone in the narrow stair-way, holding the candle aslant and looking after her darkly.

But by the next morning Hubert seemed to have forgotten any personal ill-will which he might have felt. He went to his work early, and Star did not meet him when he came home in the afternoon.

"Hubert has come," said Richarda, bending over her work in the cool shadow of the front room, where the blinds were down.

"Where is he?" asked Star, halting on her way from the kitchen.

It was such a little house that Hubert could not be lost in it and be anywhere but in the one room. It was enough for Star that Richarda could not tell where he was. She pursued him to the room of death.

She found him there as before. The plain, white sheet, on which she had laid a knot of dust-stunted pinks gathered from their own small plot, was covered now with fragrant white blossoms, rich flowers such as money can buy, and the young man who had just laid them there was standing, not regarding his tribute with any attention, but looking, as in the night he had looked, at the dead woman's face.

Star uttered an exclamation of anger, and laid a quick, ruthless grasp upon a spray of white lilies.

He caught her hand. "Stop! What are you doing? I thought you would be pleased. She liked flowers. Oh, as to that," divining her thought, and answering, "I did not buy them with *that* money. I bought them with my last week's wages, just to please you."

She wrenched her hand from him; she was palpitating with wrath. "What does that matter? All that you can earn for years is owing to the men you have robbed; there is not a farthing of it yours." Her voice broke

into a hard, angry sob. "Do you think I will have my mother dishonoured by—by *you*?"

She gathered the flowers from the white pall, not, as we lift flowers, by their stalks, but grasping them rudely by blossom and bud, like polluted things.

He watched her. He could not prevent her without an unseemly struggle. Then, perceivng the full force of her determination, he again laid his hand strongly upon her arm.

She had seized all the flowers she could hold in both hands, and there were still many more. In her young, dimpled beauty and fierce eagerness to get hold of them all, she looked baffled, not altogether unlike a child who must drop some of its woodland spoils in order to reach after more; but different, for she was like a man in strength, possessed by the indignation of right against wrong. It was just then he laid a stern hand upon her. Even in her rage she stopped to look in his face, and their two faces confronted one another as they leaned, hot with the strength of their young passions, over the broken flowers and the dead form.

Oh, the unutterable stillness and silence of death! We seldom feel it to the uttermost, for we enter its presence stilling ourselves to meet the sight. Only yesterday this poor weak woman would have spoken words of wisdom, would have met their emotion with quick tears of pity and warning; now, in the fiercest culmination of their strife, her face near them, set in the stillness of death, reflected nothing but infinite peace.

And, strange to say, it was Hubert who seemed more under this influence of the dead face. His features softened as Star darted indignant glances at him; his

eyes gained a calm which calmed her and made her ashamed. It was many years before she looked again in her husband's eyes as she looked then, and afterwards, in lonely years, she thanked God for that memory; but now their form, their dark, gray light, their first anger and after sadness, seemed burnt in, branded with pain upon her brain. She could not remember afterwards how it was that she dropped what she had taken in her hands, but she knew that he gathered up all the flowers. He did it neatly, as he did everything, leaving not a trace of all their wealth behind. Then she was alone, crouching, trembling, by the bare, coarse sheet and the posy of stunted pinks.

She thought afterwards that he must have dug a hole and buried those flowers, for she came upon no remains of them. Poor Richarda, repining at Star's sternness and the poverty of their mother's burial, never knew of their existence.

CHAPTER VIII.

THREE days after her mother was buried Star stood on the little grass plot waiting for Hubert to return from his day's work. She had finished getting ready his supper, and, although she was not on amicable terms with him, the action of stepping to the little gate to see if he were coming seemed too natural to be resisted.

Only half the other cottages in the row had as yet been let. A thrifty gardener, whose wife it was who

was not above a day's charing, lived next on the left hand, but the house on the right was empty. The cottages which were let were neat enough, but Hubert's was conspicuous for its well-kept appearance. Only that morning he had risen early and trimmed the grass in front and rear; not a blade was in the wrong place, and the tiny flower border was in as perfect condition as care could produce upon indifferent soil in August drought.

Star noticed all this with the approving eye of a housekeeper. Habit made her take satisfaction in the neat appointments of her little domain; the same habit made her look with interest down the road to see if Hubert were among the distant comers, even though she felt her life to be at a deadlock, and she knew not how to live a day or an hour without transgressing the law of common honesty. Save as she would, the household expenses must go on to a certain extent. She could not voluntarily cease to live; her very life and Richarda's seemed to her a sin against the community. The protest that was strong in her against Hubert's dishonesty, and the strong effort she was making to think how best to circumvent him, for the time crushed all feeling of love for him out of her heart; yet external habit is very strong, and she came out, like a dutiful wife, to look for her husband.

Who has not felt the fascination of watching the passers on any road in the assured expectation of a familiar form? Townward, about as far away as she could see men walking, the first cross street cut the highroad; and here many figures came in view, some of which held straight on down to the cottages. Here! now Hubert was coming—that figure in gray. No; in

a moment that was perceived to be a woman. But this one, this was surely he. No; this was an elderly man—she could tell that by his gait as he approached. The next figure was too short; it was a boy's. Here came a young man. Now this was Hubert. But with longer scrutiny it was not Hubert. A while she looked, idly noticing what she saw, losing interest in each passer as he or she came near enough to be seen plainly, just as hours of the future coming to meet us so often lose their interest as they come close.

Star was still gazing at the comers from the distant crossways, when her fate came to meet her by an unexpected hand.

The boy who had passed the place to which her eyes were directed and come on unnoticed stopped close to her, scanning the numbers of the cottages.

“Are you Mrs. Kent?” He was a freckled boy of about fourteen, in a broad-brimmed hat. He did not look like the finger of fate. Star did not fear him.

She took a letter which he gave her, and while she was looking at the address and the envelope the messenger went back toward town.

The letter was from Hubert, and seemed more formally addressed and sealed than any scraps of notes about business engagements which he had hitherto sent her. She tore the envelope with curiosity.

“MY DEAR WIFE,

“I do not often change my course, for change proves one has made a mistake, and I do not often make mistakes. I see, however, that I have made one in marrying into a pious family. I certainly thought you

were the girl for me, but your early prejudices are stronger than I supposed. *I could overcome your opposition in time if I chose.* I am not running away from your anger or any of your tantrums; but, for your mother's sake, I'll leave you undisturbed in your own religion and principles. She loved and trusted me, if you do not. I have taken a situation in America. There is no use in you and Richarda coming out there; you have no near friends or relatives and you are better and safer where you are. So we shall be separated; that is the best that I can do now to make you happy.

“I put the key of my work-room in your drawer, and with it a savings-bank book, which represents thirty pounds to be drawn by you. When that is done, go to Mr. Laurie, 2, Cramond Street. His rooms are on the third floor up. I have arranged to supply you through him. You need not be afraid that I shall not do it. I do not think I have failed to perform any promise I have made you. Now I have only one request to make—if ever you have had any affection for me, if you have any regard for me, or feel that you owe me any duty as a wife, use the money I give you and live quietly with Richarda. Do not go about trying to find me or attempting to get a situation. Live as we have lived since our marriage. You and she are fond of one another, and Miss Gower is near you; you ought to be happy. If you make a fuss about my going, and seem to be deserted, you will injure my character. Say to neighbours and friends that I have an uncommonly good job on hand, and had to leave at once. I shall know what you do and how you are, but we needn't meet again. When I die you shall know it; in the mean time, I set you free

from all duty to me as far as I can, and of course I take back the promise I made that night at the stile. I am all right; don't worry about me. Good-bye.

“Yours faithfully,

“HUBERT KENT.”

Star read rapidly as she stood at the gate. When she had finished the boy who brought the letter was a good way off upon the road. The neighbour who went out charing came out to her front door with a curly-headed child holding to her gown.

“You're looking for Mr. Kent,” she remarked.

Star nodded absently. She folded the letter and was about to put it in her pocket mechanically; then, realizing that it was an important document, she put it in the breast of her dress.

“Well,” said the woman, with a sigh, “it's nice, too, to see a young man so reg'lar as Mr. Kent is.”

The remarks of people whose post of observation and experience is far removed from our own are often difficult to understand. This woman's husband was, in a dry clocklike way, much more regular than Hubert had ever been. Star could but assume that “reg'lar” in her neighbour's vocabulary stood for manly virtue of all sorts, and that Hubert's considerate kindness to the women of his house had won respect not wholly unmixed with envy; hence the sigh.

“He was very kind to my mother and sister when they were ill,” she answered.

“Yes, one might say that he was,” said the neighbour, which guarded reply was intended to give hearty assent to the proposition.

Star went in and sat down to supper.

"Isn't Hubert coming?" asked Richarda.

"Not to supper. He doesn't think he'll be home to-night."

Star's uppermost feeling with regard to Hubert's letter was incredulity.

The rude shock she had received in first seeing the hidden evil in him rendered her still incapable of trusting him in anything; and was it likely that Hubert, with all his plans laid for this country, was going away to live in America at an hour's notice?" Star took that assertion calmly, for she did not believe it. He wanted to take back his promise not to lie to her, not to steal. He had "an uncommonly good job on hand," no doubt, and of an infamous sort. He wanted to secure his own absence, to blind her to his real whereabouts, to frighten her, to test her loyalty.

"You are eating nothing; you are looking ill," said Richarda.

"Dixie, do you ever wish that you and mother and I were back in that room in Grove Street, where we were five months ago?"

"For the sake of having mother back again?" Richarda spoke slowly. "No, not even for *that*, Star. How could we have borne to have her there longer?"

Star could not answer this question, even to herself. She sat, with the pretty dignity of a young matron, at the head of her own cheerful little table, and saw her sister relieved from helplessness and suffering, able to enjoy the comfort of life with her. If time could be made to shift back could she make a different choice?

Is there in heaven an Eye which sees what might have been had we not done this or that? Or is there any other way possible than that we have taken? It was not Star's nature to muse much on such problems.

Richarda was tired; she was yet only convalescent. Star helped her to bed, and when the good-night kiss had been given and her sister slept, Star came down to the little sitting-room. Perhaps the letter was only a lover's hoax to dispel her ill-will, and Hubert would come, after all.

She made her little house fast; she sat down in her mother's chair. How often she had waited for him just thus, when he had been detained to report some late meeting or entertainment! She listened to the footsteps that now and then broke the silence on the road; she could not divest her mind of the thought that, in spite of everything, he might still come.

She took the letter, and read it over and over. What did it all mean? It could not be true that he had given her up as his wife, once for all. She did not in the least comprehend why her mind rose up in such strong revolt against believing this; she only knew that she found it easier to believe anything than this.

All likelihood seemed against it. Only those few written words to convince her! They had not even the force of speech, and his words, spoken or written, were not necessarily true.

It was not likely he would abandon all he cared for. Hubert liked his home. How he had nailed and trimmed and fashioned it to suit himself! He liked it, and he liked his wife. Star's thought paused and her cheeks burned as confirmation of this last welled up in

her knowledge. She knew, she knew beyond all desire for proof, beyond all power to question, that he liked her well. He had not grown tired of her; the opposition she had shown him had not wearied him to the extent of affecting his liking for her. Was it likely that Hubert, strong-willed, constant, as he was, would throw away for ever all that he liked, because—and then she looked again at the reason he had given her in the first and most serious part of the letter. It was chiefly her shocked distrust of him that made her suspect it of being a clever trick or deceit; but it was hard for her, any way, to believe in so sudden a change. She read the reason given, “for your mother’s sake,” and the reproach, “she loved and trusted me, if you do not.” “That is paltry,” thought Star, “there is nothing in that; she knew no ground of distrust.”

Star could not, would not, set her mind working on the supposition that his letter was simply true. At first she thought, in her self-ignorance, that it was too good to be true.

The letter was very clever; it was intended to be believed and relied on. All that Hubert did was clever. He had strong reasons, evidently, for writing it: first, probably, that he wanted his promise back without letting her know that he had immediate use for his freedom. He wanted also, no doubt, absence from her, to plan and commit some crime. Then, when that was over, he would count on time, distance, and silence to do more than all argument toward dispelling her antagonism to him. He would come back; he would explain that he had changed his course again. Her heart bridged over the distance and suddenly leaped at this thought, the

thought of his return. When—how would he come? Would he let her know before he came?

In spite of the desperate antagonism between them, she began to realize that she wanted him to come back, and she knew that he wanted to come. He did then, at that moment, love her, want to come to her and to his home. She knew it, and therefore she believed if Hubert stayed away it was only for the excitement of some daring crime and that he would not stay away long.

The determination came upon her to hinder this crime. She must find him to prevent his wrongdoing. But how? If she went and presented herself before his employers or any of his friends, how could she form any inquiry that would not compromise his respectability? The husband gone, and the wife not knowing where or when or how! Her own pride revolted against exposing the fact; she could have trampled on her pride, but not on his good name. If he had gone away anywhere she was sure he had made it right with those who knew him. Hubert always took care of appearances. If he had not gone, it would be still more embarrassing that she should make inquiries about him. And the one request that he made was, that she should be still. Was the request only on account of his own selfish interest, or was it partly for her sake? If she had "any regard" for him, the letter said. How much regard had she for him?

And if she could not find him he would steal again. However strong his purpose, she had felt sure that she could prevent actual crime if he was with her; but *now* he had taken himself away, and he might do anything.

The thought made her nearly frantic. She rose up as if with the immediate intention of going somewhere, of doing something. She stretched out her arms wildly, vaguely, in her helplessness and they fell down again beside her. She could do nothing.

It was midnight. The cheap American clock in her little kitchen ticked loudly. All footsteps had ceased. Hubert might at that moment be busy doing wrong not far away. Little as she knew of his plans of operation, her mind pictured many horrible possibilities. She remembered how calmly he had boasted that he would choose death rather than capture. If in some extremity he should take the poison he had shown her, would they know whither to take him home? She wondered if they would let her have him dead.

It had seemed bitter to her a few days before to live on the proceeds of crime, to share her daily life with the criminal. Now she knew that the worst pain lay in the love she bore him : to have him in her arms again—that was the cry her heart made now, to have him back, living not dead. Oh, to be able to speak to him once again, to hold him back from his temptation by the warmth of her embrace, to cover his very feet with tears and kisses in the attempt to persuade him to keep them in the right paths! This, this had been her privilege—*had been*; and she had cast it away.

CHAPTER IX.

NEXT morning Star put on her neat bonnet and went in the town to the newspaper office in which Hubert worked. She knew the place, for she had several times met him there.

Just within the door there was a counter, behind which two young women were selling papers and taking advertisements. Star had been taught to go past this counter and up a narrow stair when she wanted to find Hubert at his desk. She did so now. She almost expected to see him as she went up. The desk stood in a large room where there were other desks, and where about a dozen men of various ages were at work. The place was photographed on Star's mind only with Hubert at his accustomed post. She felt startled at seeing it without him, as one would be at seeing a picture with the principal figure obliterated. She stood on the threshold. A young man looked up, put his pen behind his ear, and finally came forward to see what she wanted. He probably recognized her as Hubert's wife; she thought of that as she formulated her question.

"Did Mr. Kent leave anything here for me?"

He went back without a word, spoke to several of the men, who hardly looked up from their work as they answered. He went to Hubert's desk, and Star knew it must be empty from the hasty glance which satisfied him that there was nothing there.

"He does not seem to have left anything," he said, again approaching Star.

“Thank you; I am very sorry to have troubled you.”

She tried to speak in cheerful tones to match the cheerful look she put on. She hesitated on the words, however, to give herself excuse for one more searching glance round. Was Hubert gone out for an hour, or for ever? She dared not ask. Probably any one of these men knew when, and why, and perhaps where, Hubert had gone. No doubt they would gladly tell her all they knew, and she, who was most thirsting for their knowledge, was the only one who would disgrace him if she gave a questioning look.

Just as she was turning one of the older men looked at her through his spectacles and came to her kindly.

“Mr. Kent does not seem to have left anything. Did you expect a parcel or any such thing?”

It was a hard question to answer.

“Oh, it does not matter; I thought perhaps—— I am sorry to disturb you.”

The young man went to his work. The older man had a short grizzled beard; he rubbed his hands together in a kindly, nervous way.

“We are sorry Mr. Kent has left us. We wish him all success, I am sure.”

Poor old proof-reader! It did not seem, from his shabby coat and nervous ways, that he had found much of what is called success.

Star thanked him; but he volunteered no further information, and she, terrified lest he might ask a question that would expose her ignorance, turned away.

When she was out again in the narrow, bustling street she felt loneliness as she had never felt it before.

There was no longer any one in that busy part of the world who belonged to her. And he who had connected her with the cheerful bustle of this life—where was he? Clearly he had left his situation, left it with the pretext of beginning something else—that was all the information she had gained. She thought of his letter. He had said “I shall know what you do and how you are, but we need not meet again.” Was he spying upon her movements? If so, he was still in town.

She threaded her way through alleys and courts to the address Hubert had given of that Mr. Laurie who was to supply her in the future with money. It was her last resource; she knew of no one else at all likely to be in Hubert’s confidence. She might, at least, see who and what this Mr. Laurie was.

The place which she came to was very respectable. It was a collection of offices, and Star, reading the door-plates, gathered the idea that their owners had to do with law in various ways. She found the room she wanted without difficulty, but the man she sought was out of town—an office-boy with a superior air explained to her that Mr. Laurie was always out of town in August.

Star went to the place where the omnibus started, and was jolted home. It was warm and close inside, but she had not energy to ride on the top. When she got home she examined the bank-book afresh. It represented the sum that Hubert had said. She took the key of Hubert’s work-room and looked through it. There was nothing to arrest her attention. She searched in all the receptacles, fearing to find some disguise of dress or some unlawful implement, but there was

nothing but carpenter's tools and the bits of things with which he had been working.

This room, just under the roof, was dry and hot in the midday sun. She would not have heeded that, she wanted to sit down on the floor and cry, but two angry-looking wasps came in at the little window when she opened it, and by these small things Star, in the midst of her large misery, was driven from the only retreat where she might have given way to sorrow unobserved. She went down and sat at her sewing. There seemed to be no housework to do now that Hubert was gone.

Marian came down the road and in at the door. She saw Star through the window, and found her way into the sitting-room without knocking. Richarda was lying down upstairs. Star would rather Miss Gower had not come. She had seen her several times since she had known Hubert's secret, and each time, compelled by instinct of honour, she had tried to set a greater distance between them.

This was weary work, and now she needed sympathy and counsel, ah, so sadly!

Miss Gower sat a little way from her. Her face was animated.

"You are not yourself to me," she said; "you have not been since the night you brought Mr. Kent to see me. But I will not tease you about it; your real self will come back to me some time, won't it?" She spoke coaxingly.

Star's mother had died since the evening spoken of; it was no cause for wonder that Star stooped over her work and tears dropped upon it.

Marian's own eyes filled with tears.

Instead of talking, they sat quiet for a little. The tears dried.

"I have something to tell you," said Miss Gower. "If you do not know it already, I think you will be interested."

Star could not conceive that she would feel any interest in it. She answered as best she could.

"Perhaps you do know it," continued Miss Gower. "Have you heard that Dr. Charles Bramwell is going to be married?"

Star dropped her work and looked intently.

Marian looked away; she affected to notice something on the table. "He has been engaged to his cousin for some years. I did not happen to know it, but it seems that in his own set it has been no secret. They are quite devoted to one another, and are to be married this winter."

Star did not make any exclamation, but she felt intense surprise. All her acquaintance with Bramwell seemed in some way discordant with this report of his exclusive devotion to another. The fact that she had been mistaken in thinking that had she not, in the bitterness of poverty, sought help elsewhere, Bramwell might have offered himself as a rescuing prince was not a matter now to affect her either for happiness or unhappiness, except that it seemed to her despondent mood to prove that there was no such thing as romance in reality, that princely lovers were all in fiction, and life seemed a little more dreary. And yet, her thought confessed swiftly, how very natural it was that Bramwell should marry a girl connected with his home life;

how unnatural that he should seek a lady-love in the accidents of his practice !

“ Well,” she said slowly, “ if that is so, I think he must be somewhat of a flirt.”

She said this thinking more of his conduct to Marian than to herself. Both these women knew, to a certain extent, what the other was thinking, but there are degrees of thought and emotion which are not easily translated into words.

“ Yes, I think his manner is unguarded,” said Miss Gower composedly. “ I certainly thought, seeing him with you, for instance, that if he had happened to know you before your engagement—that, in short, he admired you.”

The words “ for instance” touched Star’s sympathy ; they implied so much, reserved so much. Miss Gower could say, “ I thought he admired you,” when she could not say, “ I thought he admired me.”

“ I suppose,” went on Marian with hesitation, “ he enjoys talking to women he likes, and does not know how attentive he appears.”

“ He ought to know. His character gives weight to what would not be thought of twice in other young men.”

“ He is warm-hearted by nature, and it is a principle with him to try to do good by being sympathetic.”

Star looked at Miss Gower, and was struck with a new sweetness, a new dignity, upon her face. She was always sweet, but here was something more, as of a nun in the inspiration of recent vows, as of a fair woman who had newly found life’s satisfaction. Star could not quite interpret the change. She did not care to pry into it.

She felt a sensible increase of her own affection for her friend; she felt that friend's refining force. The easy self-confidence of youth and western training, which hitherto had kept her from a thought of inequality, suffered its first shock. "I am vulgar beside her," thought poor Star. It was a new slip down the side of the valley of Humiliation, into which Star was surely falling. The grass of that happy valley was not yet beneath her feet, so each step was painful; but she hardly felt the pain now, because her attention was not on herself.

Marian Gower, unconscious of scrutiny, was absently toying with a red rose which she wore in the front of her bodice. Her gown and bonnet were silver gray, and the laces that decked them were like gossamers at dawn, before sunlight strikes them. The rose was red—the good, old-fashioned, pinkish red. It was a perfect rose, though perhaps a little faded, and the woman's face that bent above it was perfect too in its feminine prettiness and grace.

"Surely," thought Star, "the men of the world have been great fools not even to try for such a prize." Yet she could not say that any particular man was a fool, not Bramwell if he were pledged to his cousin; and yet——

"If he fell in with silly women, he'd get into trouble," said Star. "He may mean to be kind, but he ends in flirting."

"He *does* mean to be kind. It is quite as easy to make mistakes in kindness as in unkindness, and perhaps more harmful."

"Is it?" cried Star. The idea came to her with the

force of a criticism on her own conduct. "We think that as long as we mean well we must be pretty nearly right. Can well-meant mistakes do as much harm as others?"

"Don't they often seem to do more? It is like a false stroke with a sharper implement. Self-seeking is a clumsy tool compared with seeking to do good."

"Then it is better not to live if, when we try our utmost, we do harm." The echo of a world's discouragement was in her tone.

Marian ceased playing with her rose. "It is not doing our utmost to blunder on when God's wisdom is there for our seeking."

"There is no use to say that. I know the Bible says it. One can believe it only till one tries."

"You mean, till one begins to try, expecting the beginning to touch the end; but if you tried to use a sculptor's finest chisel without a long apprenticeship to his way of working, would you cry out that nature was unjust because you cut yourself or broke the marble? Would you expect the teacher to be pleased, because your effort was earnest, when you had not waited to be taught?"

There was no reply.

"Star," said Marian. It was the first time she had called her by her name, and it sounded sweetly loving and familiar, but Star's face dropped. She could give no reply. "Star, we try to fashion men into angels in our spare hours, and feel that God is honoured by our excellent intentions. We have to learn that the honour of being taught such work is worth every preliminary sacrifice of long effort and patience."

Marian was speaking out of some new insight of her own, and of work that was not as yet tangled with the

fibres of her heart. Her own words seemed to her full of power, but Star, feeling that her very life depended upon finding some Heavenly guidance and that instantly, gained little from them.

“If we try in God’s way we have all His power behind us,” said Marian. “There is no such thing as failure then; it is worth giving one’s life to learn.”

“Yes,” said Star. She hardly knew to what she assented.

Stitch, stitch; Star bent over her work. It is not when we are most in need of instruction that we are best able to take it in. The intolerable pain at her heart seemed more soothed by mechanical work, by an almost frivolous interest in Dr. Bramwell, than by words of wisdom.

As she worked she said, “There is one thing that makes me think that perhaps we took our ideas of Dr. Bramwell too much from what happens in tales, and that we might have been wiser; and that is that Hubert——” As she came to the name she stopped an instant. Her own voice, as she uttered it, seemed to have a far-off sound as of something that had passed away.

“Yes?”

Star roused herself. “Hubert, you know, saw Dr Bramwell’s very attentive manners, and never thought anything of it. I wondered sometimes that he didn’t. I am often surprised to find how much more of the world he knew in many ways than I.” She finished by drawing in her breath quickly. It shocked her to find that she had used the past tense.

Marian did not notice. “Well, let it be,” she said. “I have come to tell you something else to-day.”

Then she told all about Gilchrist, and the beggar called Silvia, and the baby, as much, at least, of the story as she could rightly tell. Again, to her own surprise, Star's attention was arrested.

"And Gilchrist was so good all the time," she exclaimed simply. "He is truly good."

"Yes," said Marian, "what he has done has been like a vision of higher things to me. He himself is just the same clumsy, ungainly man as ever, but his way of looking at things, his way of life, is to me the sort of thing, that, when we see, we know we shall be wicked if we do not try to be better for seeing it."

"Oh," said Star. Marian spoke fervently and Star respected the fervour, but she did not comprehend much. It so seldom happens that one spirit can share its revelations with another.

"I no longer wonder," said Marian, "at the influence he has over my uncle. I can only rejoice in it."

"The poor baby!" sighed Star. "It doesn't belong to Richarda's romance, after all; but it is the baby that mother nursed sometimes. She would have liked to do something for it. She would have liked to keep the poor woman."

"And we are going to help them as she would have done," said Marian,— "you and Richarda and I."

"We?" said Star faintly. How little Miss Gower, in her new enthusiasm, knew of the trouble that was crushing her! Then she listened stonily to what was to be said.

"Yes; we are going to help them. Gilchrist says if each well-to-do person would help along one poor one there would be no 'masses.' I have felt all my life that it was useless to try to do very much for any one,

because there were multitudes who needed the help just as much. What does that matter to me? The multitude belongs to God; the one or two that I can give part of my life for He has given to me."

She went on to say that she wished to rent the cottage next to Kent's, and put Silvia and the baby in it. "We will give them the house; we will give them food and clothes. We must count all that as just nothing; but you and Richarda and I are going to give her part of ourselves—friendliness, patience. Your mother would have done it. She wants to try again for the baby's sake. If we all help her to take care of it, to love it, and be proud of it——" There was no latter part to that sentence. "This man's prayers and sacrifice for her must be of some use in the end. And then," said Marian gaily, "we are going to help some one else, too. You will laugh when I tell you who. It is Mr. Tod."

Star did not laugh.

"It is a real question in this life, 'Who is my neighbour?'—isn't it?" pursued Miss Gower. She spoke a little diffidently; she feared ridicule. "It seems to me when a fellow-being comes across my path, and shows a dog-like affection for me, that I, who ought to feel a duty to all men, have some special duty to him. It would usually be difficult to define that duty. In most cases it would remain undefined; but in this case, when the man concerned is deprived of health and also of the means of livelihood, we might make some effort to define it. It would surely be a vulgar interpretation of life that would make his pathetic fancy a reason for not helping him."

Just then Richarda wakened from her noonday nap

and came downstairs with clattering step. She halted on her crutches at the threshold of the little parlour and Star looked at her with loving eyes. How different she was from the wan, suffering creature of two months before! The returning glow of vigour was transforming all her frame; it gave increasing merriment to her eyes, increasing flush to her cheek. Her eyes twinkled now at the two sitting there, for Richarda, having been well fed and well rested, was in a frolicsome mood.

The little parlour looked as pretty as when Star had first arranged it in the high hope of happiness. She looked about it now with a frantic feeling of imprisoned sorrow. Was happiness, after all, not meant to be sought? and something cried out within her, "God must mean us to seek so fair a thing." Miss Gower sat in her summer robes; the young house mistress sewed on with apparent contentment; Richarda came into the pretty parlour. She had no idea concerning the death that had come so recently there, that should cause her gloom. Tender regret there was, but with it Richarda's heart was as light as the steps of the boy who went whistling by upon the road, as the summer wind that flirted with the plants in the window.

And Marian unfolded her plan further. Mrs. Couples could not afford to keep Tod much longer. The two upper rooms in the cottage to be rented would serve for a lodger of Tod's status very well. Gilchrist said that Silvia at her best was perfectly capable of cooking for Tod. If her own first child had lived he would be about Tod's age now, and now she was growing into an old woman the motherly instinct, which she had so long lacked, was returning to her.

All this Marian explained, giving details which made the plan seem feasible. "We can but try," she said, "and if we fail entirely we shall know better how to try again."

Richarda's eyes dilated and her face rippled over with laughter. "We," she cried; "we—Star, and I, and the elegant Miss Gower, and Mr. Gower's fat valet—are to train them in the way they should go—the wretched beggar, the poetic Tod, and the squalling baby. They are all mere babies, so to speak, and we will judiciously bring them up. It will be delightfully funny. Will Tod hold the infant occasionally, and Mr. Gilchrist read good books to him meantime? And when you pass the window you can, according to the instruction of all good books, create happiness by gracefully presenting him with a smile or a rose. Star will labour the while with the beggar to persuade her to keep her house in order, and I will sit and laugh."

"It is something of that sort I had in my mind," said Marian unabashed.

"I'm in," said Richarda inelegantly.

"You will do more than laugh, because," Marian spoke shyly, "because you are your mother's daughter. You may think I am rude to take your help for granted, but she would have liked to do it, you know. And then I have an air castle in my mind. If we succeed, we will get uncle to buy all these cottages—Gilchrist, I think, can make him—and get people fate gives us by degrees into them, and then we could call them by your mother's name, for we are trying to imitate her."

There was a short silence.

"And," Marian continued, "Star shall be queen of them all, because it is the exquisite way she has kept

this house which has made it seem so much worth while to put any one near her. Other women must long to imitate her, and Mr. Kent will take an interest in our people for her sake."

Star rose up suddenly. "I cannot listen to what you say," she said. "I am very miserable. Hubert has gone away for a while, and—and we have quarrelled." She stood, such a picture of young strong misery, that they looked at her startled but incredulous. "I would not tell you if I could help it; we shall make it up again, but just now I am miserable."

She had borne her silence like a burning thing that she could hold no longer. She crept upstairs now, and, going to Hubert's pillow, she knelt and choked out great heartsick sobs upon it.

Marian walked away. She could not fathom the extent of the trouble. She walked home, thinking sorrow that had so unwillingly revealed itself would shrink from even a friend's eye. No sooner home than she wondered if she had deserted her friend, and she walked back. She found Richarda frightened. Star was pacing her own room. Her heart within her was crying out against any appearance of ease. Hubert's letter had said, "I shall know how you are and what you do." Her heart made answer, "Let him know this then, that I cannot endure it."

"Oh, Dixie, Dixie," she said, looking down at the trembling Richarda with pitying eyes, "only do not mind me, only let me not feel that I am harming you, and that, at least, will be relief."

Marian stretched out loving hands to her. "Tell me, where has he gone? When will he come back?"

Star recoiled from her. "I can't tell you," she said hoarsely.

And the misery of it was that her words were true in a sense Marian could not guess.

Poor Star!

CHAPTER X.

"IT is of no use to pretend; if Hubert knows what I do and how I am, let him know that my heart is breaking." So thought Star the next day and the next.

She had, at first, a vague faith in her husband's power of gaining knowledge of her in mysterious ways that she could not even imagine. It was a faith born of her lack of power to understand him, akin to that by which the ignorant used to attribute supernatural power to the wise. But in these miserable days, as a truer comprehension of his character was borne in upon her by the strength of her pain, her idea of mystery in connection with him dwindled. If he really knew how she accepted his departure he must have some means of informing himself. She tried soberly, patiently, to think what this means might be; it might serve as a guide for trying to find him; but she had no clue for thought to work on.

Marian came each day, receiving no encouragement for her visits, but gently persisting. As Star seemed to have little to do, she tried innocently to force distraction on her by talking of the project of which she herself was so full

Gilchrist had been to consult Mrs. Couples on the subject of Tod's removal. Mrs. Couples warmly applauded the scheme, but pleaded that Miss Gower herself should broach it to the invalid.

"For he's peevisher, sir, than you would believe talking of doing himself a mischief with taking too much of his medicine, because he can't pay, and has no friends but the mother's sister's husband who got him the place he's lost." Such had been Mrs. Couples's preamble, without beginning, without end. Marian, making up her mind to go, asked for Star's companionship.

And Star went, because Mrs. Couples and her lodger had been fond of Hubert. She felt that it would be a comfort to sit in their presence. She was willing to go anywhere where there was a chance of hearing the music of his name.

Mrs. Couples, good soul, had for some weeks kept her troublesome lodger in her own sitting-room, having been obliged to let his to another tenant.

Tod, who was left a mere wreck by the rheumatic fever, sat, gaunt and mild, in a reclining chair, his hands muffled in woollen mittens, his shoulders draped in Mrs. Couples's old shawl.

She sat by her table, cheerfully working in her account book at sums that were the harder to do on account of Tod's arrears of payment.

It was not to be expected that either would rise when Star and Marian entered, nor did they.

"Well, I'm sure," said Mrs. Couples blandly; "yes, I'm sure—yes, dear, he's rather dilapid since he was ill; Mr. Tod is rather dilapid, Miss Gower. He'll be able to speak to you soon, yes, soon."

Indeed, whether Mrs. Couples correctly described Tod's condition or not, his state when he suddenly saw Marian was not one that admitted of formal greetings. He stared, and seemed to collapse into a sunken attitude, almost under the shawl that had lain on his shoulders a moment before.

"Oh, come, Mr. Tod," said Star encouragingly.

He struggled up, leaning towards them over his elbow, which rested on the arm of the chair. He gazed only at Marian. His eyes were round and very blue; his weak mouth trembled. Marian, looking at him, experienced a shock of discouragement. Was it possible to make this fool's life really happier, and thereby nobler?

She always spoke to the point. It was a trick she had learned in school.

She began by telling him that she had been sorry to learn that he had been so ill, and that, being unable to work, he was now without means of support.

He wriggled as she spoke, but never took his bright blue gaze from her face. "Yes," he said, with some dignity, "any one would be sorry, Miss Gower, to see how I have fallen away and become a beggar."

"I have come to propose a plan by which you will cease to be dependent on others. There is a poor old woman and a young child, whom I am trying to befriend; I have taken a house for them next to Mrs. Kent's. We have come to ask you if you will come and live in two rooms of it for a while, and help to look after them and the house a bit."

She felt that her plan, hard to explain at any time, was almost too difficult to translate into words now, when Tod thus silently stared at her. All her words

sounded like a monotonous song, sung to an accompaniment of Mrs. Couples's attentive murmurings.

"Well now—yes, yes;" these words filled up the pauses.

"It is so cheerful a situation," said Marian. "The cottages are so particularly dry and sunny, and Mr. Gilchrist can get you some work in making hand-made rugs, which you can do without great exertion. We hope, in a year or so of such rest, you will be much stronger, Mr. Tod."

Something of more manliness than they had ever yet seen in him was evident, produced perhaps by the stimulus of her presence.

"I am afraid I shall never be stronger."

"Oh, come, Mr. Tod!" said Star again. She meant merely to remonstrate.

"Yes," he answered, "I'll come. I'll make the rugs. It's a new trade; I didn't know before anything about rugs, or how they were made; but I'll do whatever you like, Miss Gower."

Marian received this quick surrender with a certain consternation. "I am afraid we have taken you very much by surprise. You see, what I have told you now in a few words has been the result of long and careful consideration on my part and Mr. Gilchrist's. Mr. Gilchrist is very clever in finding out ways to help people. I hope in course of time to help others as well as yourself, Mr. Tod."

"Yes," he answered resignedly. "I am but a drop in the ocean; I am aware of that."

"The main thing is that you will come," she continued simply; "and you will do what you can to

occupy and interest this poor woman. I will tell you about her. Her name is Silvia."

"It is a lovely name," he said.

"Yes; but she is not lovely now. She is fifty years old; her hair is gray, her face all wrinkled with exposure and trouble. She has been going about the streets begging, and has often been drunk; but, in spite of this, she has some virtues. We have all of us mixed qualities; have we not, Mr. Tod?"

He did not answer. For the first time he seemed to have some doubts as to the assent he had given. He was not a clever man, but he knew that a woman who was a drunkard and a beggar did not belong to his station in life.

Marian hastened on. "She has virtues: she is kind-hearted, and never rude or ill-tempered. She has been really kind to this child, whose own mother deserted it. You will not be confused with her in any way, Mr. Tod. You will have your own rooms and live like a gentleman. All that I am asking you is, that you will aid me in befriending Silvia and her adopted child."

He sighed. "Who am I that I should befriend any one?" he asked.

She answered cheerfully. They all answered in a cheerful, encouraging way. When Richarda was told about it she said it was like a chorus in a comic opera. But it had its effect; by degrees he brightened into an almost hysterical delight. (He was terribly weak with illness.) He would have vowed eternal friendship for all Marian's *protégés*, if she had let him.

Mrs. Couples, who had ever and anon interjected appropriate words, now grew more insistent. As yet

none of the substance of the talk had been her own. She would not be defrauded of a loved right to speak. Her words rivetted Star's attention as nothing had done since she had last heard Hubert's name.

"You're looking but poorly," said she. "It's no wonder, no, thinking of your 'eavenly ma, and Mr. Kent's going to America too. Yes, I knew you'd feel it, so sudden; an' I said to him, it was too sudden to leave you, but he seemed to think that sudden was as good as slow when he must go, and of course it was a great accommodation to Mr. Tod, taking the ticket and all, for he never thought to write about the ticket and the firm he serves being hard on him."

Star moved her chair near Mrs. Couples.

"Did he take a ticket from Mr. Tod? I did not hear about it: tell me."

How wearily long the answer seemed, yet, for the speaker, it was concise, for, although Star strove to appear not too curious, something in her intense desire to hear communicated itself.

It seemed that here, where Star had never thought of inquiring about her husband, she could receive some real information, as reliable, at least, as his own report of himself.

Hubert had made no secret of his departure. He had said good-bye here; he had, at all events, appeared to be quite frank about his plans, and the ostensible occasion of the suddenness of his departure had been Tod's ticket. Tod's passage and berth were booked by a ship sailing that week, and, as he had forgotten to give them up in time, some of the passage-money which his employers had paid was forfeit if the ticket could not be

used. The money thus lost was not much truly, but it was much to Tod. "So," said Mrs. Couples, "we told Mr. Kent about it, quite unsuspecting that he was going away, or so far, and, says he, in his quiet way like, 'I'll take it,' and he whips out the money for it to me, Mr. Tod being in arrears. So surprised we was, I declare it clean took my breath away—yes, away—yes, away."

Her tone lingered on these syllables while she collected her thoughts to give further report. It seemed that her idea was uncertain whether the adverb she was repeating referred to Kent or her own respiration.

Star's heart was palpitating with questions she could not ask.

"He said good-bye there and then, as he had to get his outfit in London. And I said, couldn't he take you with him for the few days in London; and he explaining you couldn't leave your sister, and saying he'd made it all right with you, and telling us he'd had such a good opening and how sorry he was to leave you; yes—yes, dear—yes. I hope he'll come back soon, for I assure you it came on me so sudden I shed tears—yes, dear, yes—and Tod shed tears too."

She showed exactly how this feat had been accomplished by squeezing bright tears out of her small, fat eyes now; they rolled over, plain to be seen and unmopped. Tod, beginning to feel reaction from excitement, in his great physical weakness might have played his part again also, but Star got herself out of the room and out of the house. The shortest farewell she could make seemed to her to risk the exposure of the ignorance of her husband's plans which she felt to be her greatest shame.

When they had walked out of sight of the house Star turned to Miss Gower. She gave no explanation, no excuse for her request; it seemed to her that her misfortune gave her a right to command.

“Will you go back now? will you find out, without exposing my ignorance, what is the name of the ship and where she sails from? Will you pretend that you want to know yourself without wishing to ask me; or make some excuse? Can you? will you?”

Her voice grew more questioning toward the end Marian, astonished as she was to realize that Star knew so little, turned without comment to do her behest.

Star, moving on, quickened her pace. It seemed to her important, for some reason, to get home quickly. She could not endure to think of wasting a moment; she felt foolishly that if she kept on hurrying in all that she did from this Monday afternoon until the Saturday on which Hubert was to sail, she might have the better chance of seeing him. She had walked herself breathless and weary before she realized how futile was her haste. She perceived now that to get home sooner or later would make but little difference. She slackened, and her arms dropped as she walked up the dusty road on that warm September afternoon. The sky overhead was an endless, dull, gray-blue. The strawberry plants lay withering in the brown looking fields. The trees of the park were touched with yellow and brown. Star looked at her home, and could not endure to enter. Richarda was looking over Silvia's new house. Star sauntered on the road, waiting for Marian.

When she came, Star was seized with a sudden fear lest some word should be overheard. She made Miss

Gower walk swiftly on to the isolated stile at which she and Hubert had quarrelled when the last moon was full.

Marian humoured her mood. "I can tell you more than the name of the ship," she said pityingly. "It seems that Mr. Tod gave him the address of the inn in Liverpool to which he goes, and your husband spoke as if he would go there."

She went on to explain that the ship would sail on Saturday morning, so it seemed probable that Kent would spend the night before there; but he had given them to understand that he had business that would keep him up to the last moment in London.

That was all the information that Marian had to give. The London address they did not know.

Marian would gladly have made some amends for the meagreness of her tale by some demonstrations of love and sympathy for the bereaved wife, but Star's whole manner had for some time repelled her.

"What is the matter?" she asked; and they both knew that the question referred to this coldness.

"Matter!" echoed Star, as if a voice of mocking at her own horrible situation came from her unbidden.

She sat on the bar of the stile. The pasture field and hedgerows, that had been lovely in the glamour of the moon, now looked scrubby and coarse. Star looked about her, comparing that scene and this; but her misery in each had been little different. That was the beginning; what would be the end?

She might as well speak now as at any other time.

"Miss Gower, you have been very kind to me."

"Oh no," said Marian gently.

“Yes,” Star persisted in a hard, dull way. “I am not worth your friendship, yet we have been real friends, and I love you.” The word “love” seemed strange to her; she repeated it wonderingly—“love you. You were so good to mother and to Richarda, and I never met any one I liked so well as you.” Never was declaration of affection so coldly made.

“Why do you say this to me?” asked Marian reproachfully. “I, too, love you; indeed, you do not know how much happier you have made me. It is of no use, I think, to *talk* about friendship. It is only when we *feel* how much it means that we know. Words seem to mean nothing.”

“Yes,” said Star. There seemed to come a spasm in her throat which she choked away. Two tears came. She dashed them away too.

It is said that in moments of great suffering or danger visions of the past in a new light often arise uncalled for in men’s minds. Just at this moment, when Marian stood by her in all her lovely ladyhood, confessing her love and friendship, the thing she had done in answering a marriage advertisement came very clearly before Star. Her mind pondered it a moment. She actually stopped in the midst of her renunciation to pass judgment on her former self. “It might have been right for some girls,” she said to herself, “but it was unwomanly in me.” Then she went on aloud with what she had to say.

“I only ask you to believe what I say. You mustn’t be friends with me; there is a reason why which I cannot tell you. There is a reason why I must never associate with you any more. I don’t know that I can

go on living here; I don't know what will become of me and Richarda. I must try to find my husband."

Her words came with quick, disjointed phrases. She gave Marian no chance to reply. She ran from her.

CHAPTER XI.

STAR went home and tried to take up her daily work, tried to be to Richarda what Richarda in her convalescence most needed—a calm and cheerful companion. It is certainly not the sorrow which can wear weeds and weep behind a veil which is the most maddening.

At the end of the week Hubert would be in Liverpool, if what he had said was true. Till then she could do nothing; then and there she might hope to see him, *if what he had said was true*. It was these last words that sounded over and over again in her brain, like the sound of the beating wave to one who fears tidings of a wreck.

She believed that he had gone to London at first. So well as he was known in the town it was not possible that he could give out that he had gone to one place and start for another. All his acquaintance would know what Tod knew. Hubert was too clever to spread conflicting reports, or to leave with any appearance of mystery.

But, once in London, how easy it would be to him to lose himself and come back to his own town, or any other, to accomplish the bad purpose he might have

formed! Even if he meant to sail from Liverpool and she could meet him there, the intervening time was the region in which Star's darkest fears flitted hither and thither and found no resting-place.

Yet she tried to put Hubert's probable crimes and dangers out of her mind, and face the question of her own duty. If Hubert intended to keep to the plan sketched in his letter she could not perform her part of it. She and Richarda could not live on his money. She could not fulfil this his last request, even though she loved him more than he could know.

Then Star remembered her former weary attempts to get a situation, and her incapacity to fill the only one she had found. The problem, always so easy to solve in theory, so terribly difficult in practice, of earning a livelihood, stared her in the face, and it would be a year or two yet before Richarda could work without danger of a relapse into illness.

The difficulties which beset her in living where she was applied equally to returning to California. Richarda could not take that long journey for months yet—not then without luxuries for which they could not pay. Indeed, the cheapest journey they could make must be made on money stolen or begged; and when once there it seemed that their friends would be burdened indeed to find them the means of living—she a deserted wife with no plausible account to give of her husband, and Richarda on crutches.

To every side she turned, and the outlook seemed barren. Educated only for household work, and with a frame too slight to endure drudgery, she felt like a soldier set down on a battle-field without an implement

of war. She saw the truth of what Hubert had said—that the mere willingness to work honestly was not enough to win bread from the civilized world. A special education, or a great natural aptitude for some sort of marketable work, might possibly have detracted from some charm of her young womanhood; but it would have saved her much in the past; it could even yet save her. She was only the dear daughter of a home, left homeless; a young woman tenderly, yet sensibly, reared to habits of diligence, thrift, good sense, and good temper. These, with fair health and a comely person, were the extent of her fortune; but the fortune was not enough to feed, clothe, and lodge her and the sister fate still left in her charge. The one task she felt she could perform well was that of a household servant; and, supposing that she should dare that and manage to endure the toil, she could not, out of the earnings, clothe herself and support Richarda.

She turned back now with a sort of wistfulness to the charity, cold as it had been, which before her marriage had afforded them some protection. It would have been indeed a difficult choice for a proud and honest heart between the help of charity coldly, somewhat ostentatiously, given, and an income from secret theft; but that choice was not Star's. No one would help her now; they would all point to her husband, and ask why she did not claim support from him; and she could not deny that that support was given.

But, after all, this dark shadow of the future did not occupy her so much as the more immediate possibility of seeing Hubert. That interview, if she found him, would shape the afterwards, and her thoughts sustained them-

selves in expectation of it, and gathering for the effort, grew big with intense anxiety, unformulated fears, and fearful hope.

She was determined to beg Hubert to come back, to beg him again to save money to repay what he had stolen, and to steal no more. She had proffered the entreaty to reform before, and she had no reasonable hope that it would meet with more favour now; yet she could not help having some faint hope of this, which was her only conceivable good.

She tried to think what she could say to make honesty seem desirable to him. She mustered her mental strength to con weighty arguments against all his arguments. She found herself growing indignant and wroth in the imaginary discussion, so righteous seemed her words, so wicked his. But out of her prayers an instinct was born which warned her that that was not the path to his true weal or hers. She sought, then, how to present poverty, monotony, and honesty, with her love, as something more lovely than money, excitement, and crime without it; and her representation failed to charm even herself, for she had ceased to be lovely in her own eyes.

It is the nature of undisciplined love to begin by pulling the mote out of another's eye. The sneer which the world has read into its denunciation is only in the world's coarse reading. It is solely in the light of Heaven's conviction, by which saints can see themselves sinners, that such effort is hypocrisy. Hate laughs at the mote; Selfishness lets it lie; but even Love, longing to cast it out, has an apprenticeship to serve before she may try.

Star had begun to serve this apprenticeship. She did not know that she had entered a state which theologians call "repentance"—that death to one's own worthiness out of which alone is born true worth. She only knew that, with the incessant and almost faithless prayer for help that rose like weak smoke from her heart's smouldering religion, came also the clamorous question, Who am I that I should dare to pray? But repentance is a long work; it seldom has a climax; it has no conclusion. Star reached no exciting point at which the gloom of repentance vanished and its light was all unveiled.

The week dragged on. She knew she had no inspiration out of which to speak to Hubert, yet the time of seeing him was coming nearer hour by hour. The fact was like a cruel slave-driver, and she the driven wretch.

It was additional pain to her to suspect that Miss Gower, her one friend, thought her foolish, almost demented. There was no time to be lost in getting Silvia and the ailing baby into their cottage. It was furnished for them very quickly. It was next door to Star's, and Marian was obliged to come to it. Richarda must take an interest in it and be out and in. Star could not avoid being party to the preparation. She thought that Miss Gower treated her request that they should avoid one another with the same pitiful indulgence that one grants to delirious fancies. She felt that she had seemed to behave more like a passionate child than like a true woman, and that the temper of gentle tolerance with which she was met was a just punishment. Yet she saw no better course. She would not,

could not, clasp Miss Gower's hand day by day, as if her husband had not robbed her.

When the sunlight woke Star in the mornings she remembered how bright it used to look; it was not bright now, only hot and garish. When the morning was dull and rain fell she remembered how sweet the moist earth used to smell; now the falling weather-glass seemed to have dragged her heart down with it. The day's work was weary; the sunset hour brought her no calm or recreation; the night gave her no rest. Even though we meet mental pain with fortitude, the physical havoc it works cannot be long ignored; and Star, striving to seem calm, loathed the daily round of breakfast, dinner, and tea, and, forcing herself to eat, found herself none the better for the food, but rather worse; for, idealize life as we will, the stomach has nerves over which the brain presides, and Star felt sick with sorrow, and all natural delight faded, and she found no relief.

The first thing that brought her a little rest from herself was the beggar's baby. Silvia and the child had been brought to the cottage as soon as it was ready. Gilchrist brought them and went away. Richarda went in to welcome them, and brought a droll report. Miss Gower came and spent the afternoon with them and went home again. Star did not think of going in until, in the quiet of the summer evening, she heard the baby crying through the thin wall.

"I am sure she doesn't know how to manage that child," said Richarda. "Mother would have stopped it crying in no time."

"I suppose mother's babies cried sometimes," said

Star. "I remember her saying that you cried a great deal."

"I am sure it must have been merely for the fun of the thing—not like *that*."

The manner of the cry in the next house, indicated by Richarda's last word, was weak and irritating.

"I can't do anything if I go," said Star; but in a little while went.

The advent of Mr. Tod was not to be for a week or two yet. A suitable person had been engaged to live with Silvia. She was a sensible-looking matron, in a large brown apron. Star found the two women sitting, as poor women often sit at leisure times, without the pretence of books, work, or occupation of any sort. Silvia, it was true, was at the time mechanically hushing the baby. She would not let Star hold it till it had stopped crying, which it did gradually.

"You are glad to come here," said Star gently, when she was allowed to hold the child, and Silvia had sat down in a weary and hopeless way.

"I don't know."

She was quite clean and well-dressed. Everything on her and about her was new for the new start. Star could see traces of her original beauty, but they were faint and overlaid by the flabbiness of ill-health and the stupid look of sin. Star had come vaguely expecting some sudden transformation in the beggar, but there was none.

"I am glad you have come," she said simply.

Silvia wiped her eyes in the old maudlin way, but she said nothing.

The baby, which was about nine months old now,

was wasted by illness. It put down its little weak head on Star's shoulder, and, with a thin hand, pulled at the buttons on her gown. It seemed contented. Star caressed it and paced the little room.

"What is its name?" she asked.

"There!" said the companion. "She says she doesn't know whether it has one or not. *She* don't know what it is."

Silvia sniffed sadly. She seemed to feel that some slur had been cast on the object of her cares.

"It's as nice a baby as any if it had its health," she added hopelessly; "but I can't talk."

"She can't talk," the companion explained to Star. "She says how Mr. Gilchrist told her she mustn't talk the words she's used to, and she can't talk without."

Star looked to one and the other, perplexed.

"He said," whined Silvia, "I mustn't say about 'the good Lord,' and 'the dear Saviour'—him as talks himself about them. And if I'm not *all* I ought to be, I like talking good; it's a sort of a comfort to me, and I don't know any other way to talk." She wiped her eyes. She evidently felt ill used.

The matron in the apron plainly sympathized. "He came before we left the old room, and asked her to begin here by not talking like that, and went down on his knees and prayed she mightn't. He said it was because she didn't know what the words meant she shouldn't use 'em. He means well; but, lor, would you stop a baby crowing to you because it had no sense? and I reckon God Almighty's as good to us as we are to the brats."

"Tom Gilchrist always wouldn't have it," sniffed Silvia. "He's hard on me, Tom is."

"She says she'd not have come if it hadn't been the child ailed so; and they've promised to give it doctoring and everything if she'll stay here."

Silvia held out her arms for the child. Her self-indulgent nature, always craving some sensation to comfort itself with, caused her now to want the child in her own arms.

"Do let me have it a little longer," said Star, hugging it.

"Well," said Silvia, acquiescing, "Tom says I'm not to be selfish about it when ladies want it a bit."

"It's queer to me," said the other woman, "how some likes to hold brats. Most ladies is selfish and don't like 'em."

"Many of them do," said Star gently, thinking of her mother. Her own musical voice sounded strangely against the husky chatting of these women. The child that lay on her bosom—clean now and nicely dressed—seemed to belong more to her than to them. For it there was unlimited hope; no common or stupid habit of mind or body had as yet laid hands upon it.

"It's queer to me," said the companion again, "why every lady that wants can't take a brat, for, lor, there's orphans enough. They say," she added in a moment reflectively, "that thieves' children turn thievish, no matter how they're reared; that's what prevents the gentry adopting."

Star pressed the child in her arms. She felt a new and more tender relationship towards it. "Even then," she thought, "I could love it."

“I would like to come in sometimes and play with it, if you'll let me,” she said, giving it to Silvia. “I am very lonely just now, for my husband's gone away for a bit.”

“It's lonesome, isn't it?” said Silvia appreciatively.

Star recoiled from the sympathy and checked her recoil. This woman, who was not grateful for kindness, could yet be kind.

“Yes. Please say I may have it sometimes.”

“That you may, for I know what it is to be lonesome. The dear Lord knows——” She stopped with a gasp.

Star went home. On the whole her glimpse of new beginning in the next cottage added to her sense of general discouragement. Nothing but the prophet's vision of the dry bones could suggest much hope for Silvia certainly; and Star was in the mood to see only the disease of the world, and not its cure.

Yet she went in next door several times when she knew Miss Gower was not there, and sat with Silvia and the baby. It comforted her merely to hold the child. She echoed the sighs of the woman; she tried to smile to the little one. She did not suppose that she was doing good.

CHAPTER XII.

THE days came on till it was Thursday. Early on Saturday the ship would sail. In all her life Star never forgot the hours of those three days; they brought much.

Richarda, anxious and loving, hovered about her sister, trying to beguile, trying not to appear to notice a grief that was at once sacred and incomprehensible. She found perplexity in her ministry, as, for example, when the newspaper came in the evenings. It was the paper for which Hubert had worked and written. Till now it had been their play each evening to pick out his paragraphs at sight. Now Richarda hardly knew whether to offer it for Star's perusal or to hide it away.

On this Thursday evening, undecided and taking a middle course, she sat reading it quietly, until part of its contents made her exclaim. This, thought she, was surely something that would distract without distressing.

"That genius of a burglar is at work again," she said.

Star stirred; then she was quiet again. "Well?" It was the only word her tightening throat could utter.

"It is not much. He has not done anything yet. It only says, 'Suspicious circumstances have occurred at Croom which make the police think that the thief or thieves who lately made such successful raids on the houses of two of our citizens, have designs on one of the larger houses of that place.'"

Richarda read in the rapid, parenthetical way in which one so often reads a news item. Star felt as if the trump of doom had sounded as a mere parenthesis.

"I wonder what can have happened?" cried Richarda, in interested speculation. "Just as if the burglar would be so silly as to give the police warning! Yet he may have been arranging some of his traps in advance. Miss Gower believes that he gulled them with the inside of a French doll, plus a ghost story, plus their own imagina-

tion. The time before it was a dog-fight under the noses of several sporting men. Perhaps this time it will be——” She shut her eyes, trying to think; even her imagination failed.

“I wonder what it will be?” echoed Star. She felt like a talking doll herself, to sit there and speak thus.

“It’s so silly to advertise the clue if they really want to catch him. I hope they will; it will be so exciting!”

An inward shudder ran through Star.

When she was alone in her bedroom, she sat at the window. The night darkened; cold rain began to fall. She had nothing to look at; in the dim night she could see but little. Yet, some way, there was relief in looking from the house that was familiar into the shadow of the world that was large and unknown. There was no light in her room. She sat in the dark, looking into the night.

She saw several people pass at intervals. It was late. Then she saw her husband’s friend, daft Montagu the lamplighter, go home after his work. His ladder was on his shoulder. He looked up at the house. She felt kindly towards him, for she supposed that, in his poor daft way, he was thinking of Hubert. Had Hubert said good-bye to him too?—to him, to every one, except to her! Perhaps the lamplighter descried her at the window. She thought he did, for he looked away and walked faster. Then something flashed dully upon her—was that poor Montagu? Was it not rather the man she had seen in the dawning hour when she had first met Dr. Bramwell? She started; she strained her eyes. The figure was gone past the range of the window. She sat a long time, stunned by the thought that Hubert might have passed near her and she had not run out and

followed him. Yet she did not move. She felt almost convinced that she had deceived herself by a freak of fancy. She thought she could be sure if the figure passed again. If it were Hubert, surely he would pass again to look at his home and at her! She sat long looking for him.

Hers was not a self-contained nature. The secretness of her trouble was eating away her courage and strength of character like an inward disease. Of this secret, that so burdened her, she could speak to no one but Hubert. She had not realized how much she wanted to speak—merely to talk, if nothing were gained by it—until she fancied that Hubert had been near her and gone again. It is said that the wife of Midas would have gone mad unless she had whispered her secret to the reeds—weak, silly woman! But when the secret involves the change of a life, and the change involves perplexity—in such an hour it is not strength, but inhumanity, that is content to be alone. Star felt the want of a human listener, a human voice to meet hers. She hardly knew what she wanted; she only felt that the madness of despair would settle down upon her if some one did not come to whom she could speak. She strained her eyes to look into the dim, black rain, to see if a figure like Montagu's did not come again within sight of the house. She sat thus long after the lamplighter, if he had gone on up to the hill, must have reached his hut.

At length two figures came near. They were muffled from the rain. They stopped in front of her house. How singular! They looked up at her windows. They made signs to her to come down.

Star sat stonily. Who could they be? She could

not go down and let them in. Then suddenly she perceived that one was Miss Gower. It was late in the evening and very stormy. Star crept to her front door, afraid and wondering.

Miss Gower came in. The burly man who had escorted her was Gilchrist. Star's doorstep was sheltered from rain.

"I will wait here," he said. He pulled the door shut on himself, and left them alone in the small house, with Richarda sleeping upstairs.

Marian threw off her cloak and hood. Her face was full of relief, but full, too, of serious concern. She put one hand on each of Star's shoulders.

"You could not tell me, but I know now."

Star grew very pale and cold. "How do you know?"

"No one else knows—only I; and I will bear it and share it with you."

"How do you know?"

"I think Mr. Kent told me. Whatever he may be to others, I think he must understand and love you, for he saw you were breaking your heart."

"You *think* he told you—what do you mean? Who did tell you? What have you been told?"

"You remember the silly letter I got this spring which Mr. Tod had written to himself from me?"

"Yes. Why speak of that?"

"Your husband knew about it, didn't he?"

"Yes. We made a joke about it; we always called him 'the beloved Tod' after." She spoke drearily. The remembrance of their little household jokes seemed so unspeakably sad.

“Yes. Suppose Mr. Kent wanted me to know what you know—wanted me to know for your sake—how could he let me know, so that, if I were false to you and him, or if the letter fell into other hands, not a shadow of proof would exist against him, so well as by another such letter? At any rate, I have received another letter, written like that to Mr. Tod from myself, and returned to me from the shipping office because there was no one of that name to receive it. It came by the last delivery this evening. No name is mentioned; nothing is clearly told. Look!—read it.”

Star took the letter in fingers that trembled like poplar leaves in the wind. The outer envelope, with Liverpool postmark, she cast aside. The inner envelope was addressed to Tod, on board a certain ship, but it had the ostensible sender's address on the outside, so that it could be returned unopened. The address was in disguised hand.

“I do not think it has really been sent to that office,” said Marian. “I think the inner postmarks are imitated. Mr. Kent was to be in Liverpool; he may have gone sooner and have posted this.”

The letter was in strict conformity with that foolish letter of poor Tod's, over which they had made merry. It was dated from Miss Gower's house, and signed with her name, although in no imitation of her hand. It was also addressed to Tod. The sentimental style made it particularly easy to say much without saying anything definitely. No name was mentioned; no explanation given.

Star read it with feverish speed, glancing from line to line, hardly reading, looking for some startling revelation.

"I don't see any sense in it," she said, when her eyes had come to the last line.

"That is just what I thought at first; but when I read it again—I grant you it is obscure—and yet I am not wrong, am I?"

She looked questioningly, but Star was reading again. In the letter Marian Gower purported to tell Mr. Tod, speaking of some one unnamed and undescribed, "I thought her deranged, for she eschewed my kindness; yes, when she most needed it she turned from me; but now I know her honourable scruple, for some one to whom she is bound had indeed done us an injury, acting like the thief in the night. My astonishment knew no bounds when I heard it, but it is true. And now she is alone and needing a friend." There was a sort of rhythm in the lines. Poor Tod's model had given license for little apparent sense and much sentiment. The letter, which began with allusion to Tod's concerns and ended with it, was not long, and the pith of it in these middle lines was evident to Marian's quick woman's heart, which for days had been pondering Star's distraught condition, her sudden stern niggardliness, her refusal to be friendly. Yet as she now looked questioningly at Star, she wavered in her assurance.

Star sat, her eyes glued to the written page. She saw clearly that there was nothing there to incriminate Hubert. She had no wish to admit his guilt. Her cheeks were aflame, however, with fear. Whoever had written the letter must have either known or guessed the truth.

"I see no reason for supposing that Hubert wrote this crazy letter," she said.

The moment she had said it reasons for the supposition crowded upon her. No one but he knew of her intention to estrange herself from Miss Gower. He also knew of Tod's letter and of his own crime. Unless it were possible to imagine—and fear is imaginative—some invisible detective acquainted with all their concerns, no one but Hubert could have worded the letter to hit the situation so well. What object could any one else have in thus writing?

Miss Gower took the letter gently from her hand. "If I have made a mistake," she said with gentle dignity, "I ask your forgiveness; if not, you know that you may trust me. See," she went on, "no one will ever see it." She had folded it as she spoke; now she tore it into many shreds.

Star gave a faint cry. It seemed as if some link to Hubert were being broken. The letter that might have been in his hands so recently was destroyed. She longed to pore upon every word.

She held out her hand impulsively. "Hubert *may* have written it," she murmured.

Then Marian was reassured. She turned away her head as she spoke; "I don't, of course, wish to ask you any question, only to say that my uncle need never know; by-and-by probably all that he has will be mine, and then I could give——" Her companion's shame might have been her own; she seemed ashamed to speak.

"No—no—no," moaned poor Star. "Nothing could restore his honour but to earn the money and give it back." Then she went on, "You will think him terribly wicked; you will despise him, I know. And indeed, indeed, he is not wicked; he is dear and kind

and good. You don't know how kind he was to mother."

"Indeed——" began Marian; but the torrent was not to be stopped.

"He did do it, and it was a bad thing to do; but he doesn't think of it that way. It isn't worse than gambling, or making money by paying poor work-people badly, or——" Hubert's own arguments came from her with all the eloquence of excusing love. All that he had urged for himself she urged now, and more, for she added, "And no one ever loved him, no one ever kissed him, till I did; and I have not been good. When I found he had done this I despised him. I ought to have loved him, and I acted as if I hated him. He has had no chance. But it is no use talking; you will never believe that he is good if he could do this." She buried her face in her hands.

"Star! If that poor, disgraceful Silvia can still have so much good in her that she can cleave to this troublesome baby as she does, and love it so that the man who knows her best thinks that by her love for it she may become a true woman again, we may surely believe that your husband's noble qualities will triumph over this one weakness, terrible as it is. Star, I felt almost stunned when I realized what this letter meant. I don't know how I might have thought about this if I had heard of it before I heard the story of Gilchrist and Silvia, but now——" She broke off. "I want to be your friend."

Star shrank from the hand extended to her. "You do not know me." She spoke incoherently. "I am not better than he. I don't want a friend who can't be his

friend too. I am no better. I *sold myself* when I married him. I am glad I did now, because I got Hubert; but it was a horrid thing to do. Oh, I didn't know what I was doing. I thought we should starve, and I stifled down every serious thought. I thought I could do what others did—I, with my mother!" She stopped breathless with her self-scorn, and went on again in a pauseless speech. "Oh, Miss Gower, if you want to do good, take care of Richarda. She is sweet and good. Comfort her if I go away, and help her. But I am disgraced. I have done what was as wrong for me as Hubert has for him. I am a thief's wife, and I am not any better. I love him. I will go and find him and stay with him; or, if he will not have me, I will live only to work and pray for him."

Marian had not come too soon. Star's loneliness had wrought in her a morbid horror of evil that had none of hope's best wisdom.

Marian saw that she was needed. It gave her great pleasure to be just there where she was needed.

"What about your marriage? I do not understand—tell me."

So Star told all the story—told the worst, not the best of it; and it was like a confession, for the witness of truth in her heart stood by like a priest; and perhaps in the unseen world the absolution was pronounced, for comfort came to her with the telling. And when she was weeping like a tired child, Marian gathered her to her breast. She did not say that the sin was not so black after all; whatever she might have thought she knew that was not comfort. She did not presume to comment, still less to pronounce upon it. She spoke of Hubert.

“I am sure he wrote the letter,” she said. “He must love you very much to be able to understand that you needed me. And he must have felt sure you would never tell me. Think what trust in you that shows! Then it must have been against all his natural instincts to let me know about it. To break through his secrecy to any one but you was great self-denial. If he is capable of such feeling for you—feeling of a kind that many men would neither understand nor admire—you have no earthly reason for despair.” For Star had said she despaired of persuading Hubert. “No *earthly* reason,” whispered Marian, smiling, giving new emphasis to the common phrase, “and there is never a heavenly reason for despair.”

Star smiled through her tears as if struck by a sunbeam.

“Never?” she asked like a child.

“Never; never,” said Marian.

CHAPTER XIII.

MARIAN was gone. Star could now think more clearly.

There was much that she had not told Marian—the fact that Hubert had committed other thefts than one, and the belief that he would steal again. Nor had she spoken of her fancy that he had passed in Montagu's clothes. A thought crossed her mind, and she took up the outer envelope of the letter Marian had destroyed. Marian had surmised that the inner part had not really been to any shipping office. Star, holding this one to the light and closely examining the stamp, felt convinced that it had never been through the post at all. It had, no doubt, been put in Mr. Gower's box at the time of the last letter delivery, and Star felt sure Hubert himself had put it there. Then it occurred to her how easy it would be to reach the village of Croom by a dark walk across the hill from Montagu's cabin. It was there the paper said the thief was expected. Would he go there and be taken?

How mad she had been not to think he might be on his way to Croom when she thought she saw him pass! She might have run out and stopped him then.

It was perhaps the hopeless feeling of having had one last opportunity and lost it that made her beseech Heaven, as much for herself as for him, that he might be hindered, that she might be given knowledge to know what to do for him.

She began to see the strength of God's help like the

man who saw trees walking. Her own crude desire stretched its shadow upon the heavenly promise. She laid claim to the wisdom that is promised only to the life that abides in God, expecting some spasmodic enlightenment as to where and how to find her husband.

Her prayer itself was spasmodic. The saints that complain of their distractions in prayer have, perhaps, less excuse than she had. Every now and then her mind seemed to flash over the dark hill road to Croom, piercing the darkness as lightning would, showing her her husband walking on his guilty errand along the lonely hill-top, creeping down the hillside by the castle, pausing, perhaps, where he and she had sat and kissed each other that May evening.

Then tears brought back the sense of Heaven's pity.

"Oh God, save him! Keep him from doing wrong; keep him from danger! Have mercy; have mercy; for Thy mercy's sake."

And then again her litany died away, for she seemed to hear the sharp sound of a shot and see Hubert fall before the house he attempted to enter, or to follow him in deadly chase or struggle.

She paced the room, praying thus as she could not pray on her knees, "Good Lord, take care of him, and show me what to do."

On the whole, when dawn came she felt more hope.

In the early morning she stole out to the nearest news vendor's shop to see the bulletin of the night's news. There was no word in it of any burglary. That was great comfort. Hubert had not lost himself in that past night. Her courage rose now, like a bird on the wing.

From the belief that Hubert had passed up the hill disguised as Montagu she, however, still inferred that the report of the intended burglary was true. It was only a question of last night or the next. It had not happened last night, and now she had all the hours of the day to prevent the deed. She did not at first ask herself how; she felt that her prayer and her determination ensured the end.

If Hubert was now in Montagu's cabin he would probably stay there all day.

"I will go for a walk on the hill," she said to Richarda when the day began to advance. "Do not try to prevent me, Dixie. I shall rest better in the train this afternoon if I may have exercise now."

It was a sign of sad disorder in their little household when Star roved in the morning.

She walked in the sunshine, on their own road, past Mr. Gower's park, and, just past the red walls of the Orphanage, she turned up the footpath by the quarry where Hubert had often led her. It was hot; the grass and foliage were dusty. Star climbed under overhanging trees till she came out where the quarried walls and floor of blue and fawn-coloured rock were glaring in the sun. A man and boy were working at one side with an old horse to draw the trucks on a narrow tram-track. A dog sat near them. Star had never seen any work going on in the deserted place before, and she wondered a little at the small way in which it was now begun. Three children and a governess came up under the trees behind her. They passed merrily by and went aside to take another path. Star essayed the steep footing in the rock that led to the hill road and Montagu's cabin.

It was not a frequented path. She had never tried it without Hubert's helping hand. She almost bounded up its turning now. In a minute she was before the two shanties among the fir trees.

She was surprised to find that cabin which had hitherto been unoccupied was now very much inhabited by a swarm of little children and their young mother. Star looked in blank discomfort, and the woman, with ill-mannered countenance, took up her position at the door with a baby in her arms. It was evident that her bright eyes would lose nothing of Star's movements.

Montagu's cabin was shut, and Star stepped near and tried the door gently; but there was no response.

She had come hoping to find Hubert there, and, in that lonely place, to talk with him at leisure. She had before only seen the place on cool afternoons, when the shadow of the hill was upon it and Solitude sat there contemplating the town below. Now, in the sunshine, with the sounds from the quarry rising clear, and this other cabin full of inquisitive eyes, she saw that it was no place in which to meet Hubert quietly. What excuse had she to give to the staring neighbour for having come there at all?

"Do you know whether the poor lamplighter is in his house?"

The mother of the children was perhaps more ill-mannered than ill-natured. She answered with loquacity that her husband had only lately come to work in the quarry, and she had only lived there three days, but, as far as she had noticed, the "dafty" (she nodded towards Montagu's cottage) generally came home in the early morning, and locked himself in and slept till afternoon.

“’E moight be there now or ’e moightent.” What might Star want of him?

“My husband has always been kind to him,” said Star. “I came to see if I could see him now.”

“Mebbe if you battered the door,” suggested the woman.

Star knocked again, but gently. She had raised her voice when she spoke, so that if Hubert were there he must know she stood without. Again there was no response.

She would do no more. If he were there she could not betray him by insisting upon opening the cabin to this woman’s inspection. If he were not there it was useless to enter.

The neighbour, meanwhile, less scrupulous as to methods of gaining the information apparently desired, put down her child and set a chair of her own under the lamplighter’s small window.

“Ye’ll not waäke him, but if it’s to see ’e’s there ye want——” At that, having put one foot on the chair while she talked, she stepped upon it and applied her eyes to the upper part of the pane.

To Star the whole scene seemed to swim and grow dim, so horrible did it seem to her that Hubert might thus be spied upon. The hot, meagre-looking fir trees, the parched grass, the weather-beaten cabins, the hatless children, and the woman standing with untidily shod feet on the old chair—all seemed as in a slowly moving mirror, or as when one puts one’s head upside down and sees the familiar view, in new guise, slowly grow dim as the blood rushes to the brain. It was only a moment, then a bare-legged child fell over a tin bucket half full

of water and set up a cry so sharp that it acted on Star like the shock of a pungent drug.

The mother, unmoved by this accident, was saying, "It's to-day 'e's put another cloth to the top of the window, for yeästerday I stood up and saw 'im lying on the bed." Her apology to Star was for her lack of success, not for her attempt. "If you came to see if 'e's in 'eäth loike, I thought mebbe you'd loike to know that I saw him lately, but it's to-day he's put——" and so followed a repetition of her former words with that facility for repetition that her class displays.

"Thank you," said Star briefly, and, tired at heart, she went back the way she came.

Star's lips were set firmly as she walked homeward. The brightness of her first morning hope had vanished, but she had no thought of desponding, no thought of giving up. Why should the lamplighter have put up an extra curtain that day? She felt more sure that Hubert was hiding in the cabin. She felt a sort of inward assurance that she had been near him. She thought he could have no reason for being there at all unless he intended the theft at Croom. Had the place been as lonely as before she thought he would not have quitted it till night, but now that inquisitive eyes surrounded it she felt certain he could not.

It was possible to start for Liverpool from Croom Junction at several times in the afternoon, but the only night train left Croom soon after midnight. If, then, her surmise was correct, and if Hubert was really sailing on Saturday morning, between nightfall and midnight he must go to Croom and perform his errand there. At dusk, then, she would go again to the cabin, and in some

way contrive to wait and watch and intercept him. If he were not there she could still take the midnight train and seek him in Liverpool.

It was well for her desire not to betray her purpose that both Richarda and Miss Gower took for granted that she would go by a fast train that left the town about four. Marian came to walk with her to the station. Star said good-bye to Richarda and started with her.

When they had gone half-way to the station Star stopped and tried to dismiss her companion. Her face was full of eloquent pleading, but Marian could not turn from her easily.

Why should she turn back? Would Star secure her own comfort in the train? Would she go to the inn without delay on her arrival? Was she sure she would be safe?

"Safe!" Star's heart echoed the word. She looked down the street. How many people there were coming and going, meeting and crossing! They were all safe, and she— What was before her?

"I believe I am doing right," she said slowly. "Please leave me because I have reason to think it just possible I may see Hubert before I take the train. Do not tell Richarda."

Her face was not one to be questioned. She went on alone. They never knew that she did not take that safe, comfortable, afternoon train.

When Star was out of Marian's view she turned, by cross streets, back again in the direction of the hill. The nearest graded road that ascended it ran out of the town about a mile from Star's house. To this she went.

It was a winding way. Star walked slowly and rested often. She wanted to put away time until evening.

She had very little idea how she could elude the vigilant eyes of Montagu's neighbours and catch Hubert upon the threshold of his flight. She thought she was doing right, and she thought (as those who begin to seek the heavenly light are apt to think) that Heaven would guide her to do just what she set forth to do.

She looked from one side to the other to find some safe retreat where she might wait an hour or two without attracting any one's notice. None offered. The palings and grounds of large villas lined the road about a third of the way up the hill. Then there were plantations of trees where the slope grew barer. All that was not precipitous was given up to sheep. It was not a high hill; the steepness made it bare. Star had not managed to lose more than an hour in walking and resting when she saw the signpost of the two ways a little above her, and knew that just beyond it the cabins stood under the firs. She had not intended to pass the place yet, for fear of attracting notice, yet, now that there seemed nothing else to do, she straightened her gait to walk past as any one walking for pleasure might.

The shadow of the hill was on the place now. The road was dusty; the breeze was warm and hardly talked with the stunted trees.

There was noise coming from the cabins. She supposed at first the children were quarrelling. She passed the guide-post. Then all her attention became rivetted by an object at the side of the road. She forgot to walk, and looked at it. It looked like a boiled leg of

pork of good proportions, but it was blue—very bright blue. There it lay, as if some gnome, who lived in a world in which boiled pork was blue, had laid his dinner on the stones by the roadside and would be back anon to feast greedily. There was no one in sight. Montagu's cabin was shut, as it was in the morning. The overflowing family of the other seemed to have got itself all within doors. The noise, which was muffled by the shut door, grew more loud each instant. It was a noise of screams and sobs, of blows and pushing and angry oaths, all so mingled that one could not say what one heard. Star stood arrested between her wonder at what had occurred and her natural desire to avert a catastrophe which such a noise seemed to portend. Forgetting to think of moving on, she listened, frightened, horrified. She stooped down and touched the blue dinner with a little stick. It not only looked, but felt and smelt, like boiled pork; yet it was blue—bone and fat and lean, one bright intense blue.

Then the uproar in the cabin came to a height and burst forth from the door. The woman came first—a wild, moaning thing—cowering as she ran. A man came after, striking at her with a stick, missing his aim sometimes, through the blindness of rage or drunkenness. The children overflowed the door, screaming or staring. They halted, but the woman went past Star like a wounded animal, the man coming headlong after.

“Stop! How dare you!”

He never saw Star until, instead of his wife under his hand, he saw this bright, firm, upright figure confronting him. A moment he seemed startled, as if at a miraculous transformation; then, catching sight of the

running, cowering figure further on, he swerved aside to get round Star and follow. She sprang in front. She could not think of any suitable words that seemed sufficiently severe or threatening. She only held to the first that had risen to her lips. "Stop! How dare you! Stop! Stand still this instant." She danced in his path. She stamped her little feet in a rage equal to his own. Then, suddenly, hardly knowing what she did, she swung her furled umbrella by its upper end and, with its knobbed handle, dealt him a blow on the side of the head. She felt frightened when she heard the crack of the blow.

He was not mad. He did not strike her. He put his hand to rub his head and growled, in clownish language, that he would beat his wife if he chose.

"Not while I'm here." Star uttered these words with an emphatic stamp of the foot and movement of the head.

Her blow had this effect, that he was stopped. He moved a few steps back to be out of the reach of her umbrella. The wife fled on across the road toward the roughest part of the hill.

It is familiarity that breeds in men the temper to strike a woman. Very few men can strike a woman whose dress and manner are foreign to their daily lives. It was probably nothing higher than this feeling of impossibility which withheld Star's adversary from beating her. He was a base, ignorant creature. He fell back, rubbing his temple with his hand, more disposed to grumble than to fight. His speech was of such a thick sort that she could hardly understand the drift of his growling profanity.

“Go back.” She lowered her umbrella with a threatening upward swing. “Go back.” He moved backwards. “Go back ; go further back.”

He got to his house at last, and as the children wisely drew off at his approach, he stepped backward into the doorway without doing further injury to any one.

Star looked round, to see the poor wife’s gray gown slipping past the thin line of larch trees that formed the western crown of the hill.

The man began to make some explanation. He evidently supposed that she understood, and she, fearing he was saying that as soon as she was gone he would run after his wife, still mounted guard.

She came near. “Light your pipe,” she commanded. “Light your pipe, I say.”

He stood irresolute on the threshold. There was a steam and heat of cooking issuing from the door, and Star saw in the disordered interior an old iron pot half full of blue water.

“Take your pipe,” she again commanded.

Perhaps his anger was short-lived, perhaps he was touched by what he may have thought an attention to his comfort ; at any rate he grumbly got his pipe from within. While he filled and lit it Star watched the wife disappear over the hill. She was looking, too, very steadfastly at the other cabin. It was as it had been in the morning ; she could see no alteration. She believed that Hubert was there. This made her perfectly brave. Hubert might not risk his own safety by showing himself, but he would never let her be hurt.

Was he there or was he not ? Her eyes seemed to

devour the dwelling with their question, but the humble exterior gave no answer.

When the quieting fumes of the quarryman's pipe had had time to mount to his brain Star went on up the road.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN hour later Star was sitting among the furze on the hill's north-western edge, with the poor beaten woman beside her.

She had wandered upon the flat top of the hill, seeing her own shadow grow very long. The road that led to Croom stretched white across the treeless upland. She kept a jealous eye upon each figure that ascended from the shadow where the ground dipped to the fir wood and came on into the broad sunlight of the top. Few came; no one of interest to her.

At last she had found the wretched wife in her hiding, and sat down beside her.

"Did he hurt you very much?" she asked. She hardly knew how to begin to offer consolation in what seemed to her so ghastly a sorrow.

The woman moved herself nearer. "That 'e did," she moaned,—*"the beästly beäst."* She rubbed her arms and rocked herself.

Star was satisfied by the way she moved that none of her bones were injured. So inadequate to her office did Star feel that she did not speak, but put out her hand and patted the woman as she would have stroked an animal.

The poor creature came still nearer, bemoaning her bruises and reviling her husband. The tenour of her broken talk related to the cause of the quarrel.

“’E got ’is half-week’s pay—us having nothing to go on with.” While Star was receiving the information, that came to her in scraps, half her mind was alert upon her own quest. She watched for Hubert as she sat. “’E brought the pork at dinner-toime—he did; it was the first bit o’ meat we ’ad ’ad, and I böiled it.”

A light broke over Star’s mind. “And you dropped the blue-bag in the pot?”

“Noä, I didn’t; us ’adn’t any; but the meat came out blue. An’ when ’e came ’e threw it out on the road. Oä—oä!”

Star patted her and drew the poor thing’s head on to her lap, letting her rest there awhile.

Star did not rest. Her eyes roved in unceasing watchfulness. She thought it likely that Hubert would wait for twilight, but she dare not depend on that. She dare not hover near Montagu’s cabin, for now that the excitement of anger was over, she was afraid of the incensed quarryman. She could not be sure that Hubert was there to protect her; she could only guard the way between his supposed hiding-place and the crime he might be going to commit.

All the place was gilt with the sunset. As her eyes wandered round she hardly knew that in the vast sky and broad tableland of sun-seared grass and purpling heather there was beauty. She looked at the road that lay like a white ribbon, and wondered if Hubert would come or if she would be forced to pass along it alone in darkness.

Some sheep moved about. Here and there were

light-coloured rocks and groups of flowerless furze. Everything was bathed in level, yellow light, that touched the shadows into brown, the green to bronze the crimson flowers to earthen shades of red. The sky hung, like a blue dust-cloud, far above. She could not see the sides of the hill or the plain, but she heard the evening bells ring in the town and the evening trains run round the hill's base like roaring monsters. A bramble bush near where she sat hung down its long spray of flowers and half ripe berries; it was not a rich cluster, for the place was sterile; still it was pretty. She counted a flower disc—six petals, each of white at the heart, and at the edge tinged with purple—the purple of rock amethyst held in the sun. Inside the petals was the delicate green rosette of stamens and outside was the calyx of silver green; the buds were silver green, and the stem also, until, further up the spray, the stalk, like the young berries, was turning from green to red. The sun was on the plant. The leaves looked half-transparent, bronze and yellow green. Star looked at it, hardly knowing that she looked, but afterwards she remembered that she had learnt exactly what a bramble bush was like.

Then the sun went down. The bramble looked a more common thing. All the long, sharp shadows of stone and furze went out, as flames can go out suddenly. All warmth of colour died, and the sterile scene looked as life looks to a heart in which the hope of pleasure is crushed down.

“Are you going home?” Star asked the woman.

She felt that, in her *rôle* of comforter, she ought to have something helpful to say, but she had nothing.

The only thought that came to her was, "Who am I that it should seem a strange thing that I should share the lot of so many women, and bear my husband's sins as well as his sorrows? am I worth more than they that I should shrink from taking part in this large degradation?"

She made out that the woman's plan was to remain where she was till her husband should be gone to the nearest tavern or else fallen asleep. Star asked what would become of her baby, and at that the mother moaned afresh, but expressed the opinion that it would be "crawlin' about," which she seemed to think, on the whole, satisfactory.

Star did not presume to give advice, but, when she observed that she could see the objects about her less distinctly, she stroked the poor creature with a farewell gesture.

"I am in trouble about my husband too," she said sadly. The woman stared. "Will you pray for me? I will pray for you."

"Yes," the woman replied with great heartiness; but whether she knew what prayer was Star could not tell.

Star moved away over heather and grass to the road. The evening had grown more chill. With the sunlight had gone much of her hope. She would carry out her scheme to the end, but she began to anticipate its futility and to feel her own helplessness.

Every figure which came that way she must examine in order to be sure it was not Hubert. He might personate one character or another. She was bound to suspect each, but in the gathering twilight she did not know

how to test her suspicion. If Hubert chose knowingly to avoid her how could her eye detect him? The impossibility of speaking to strange men at this hour and place came upon her as an unlooked-for difficulty. She sat by the roadside for a long while. No one came by. At length a noisy party of young men came shouting and rollicking from Croom towards the town. Star was frightened to sit, and began walking on the road. They passed without more than a glance at her, but, for fear they should turn and watch her, she walked on a good way. She had turned now towards Croom, and it was getting quite dark.

She began to think that her better plan was to go on walking at moderate pace. If Hubert came he must catch her up, and she was sure she should know if he were passing. The stars came out. The place was very lonely. She heard steps behind, and saw a man and woman coming. She was afraid of them. In front an old man, who looked like a shepherd or farm labourer, came into the road from a side path. He had a good-looking dog at his heels. Star stepped quickly and kept pace with him.

She told him that she was obliged to go to Croom on account of some trouble that had befallen her, and if he were going she would be much obliged if he would let her walk beside him.

The old man looked at her, and signified his assent. They plodded on without many words. The stars grew bright. The road glimmered whiter in the surrounding blackness. Star walked all the way to Croom, and Hubert did not come.

Her companion took leave of her below the castle,

just above the village. The railway-station was more than a mile on the other side of the place. He directed her how to find it. She saw him turn in at a farm gate, and she stood where he had left her on the hillroad above the lanes and houses.

Somewhere among the glimmering forms of roof, wall, and gable, of fruit tree and ivied chimney, there was a spot where some household treasure lay, which, if report were true, was being guarded from her husband's dishonest hands. But how could she stand by it to avert what she most feared? She said to herself that she had been a foolish woman to come where she now was.

Yet she could not stop in the darkness to contemplate her folly. She walked on down the sloping road. A few lamps marked out the line of the principal street. The church clock struck half-past ten.

Star thought the street of the lamps the most unlikely place in which to find that which she sought. She directed her steps half mechanically to the darkest roads, resolved to traverse the lanes on the side of which some better houses stood. She had very little hope of success now, but at least she would do what she had planned to do. There were still almost two hours before her train went.

She began now to be somewhat alarmed for her own safety, having an idea that to walk as she proposed walking at that hour involved great peril. When, however, she had trudged for half an hour, she grew accustomed, and lost her fear. No one noticed her as long as she walked steadily.

When she saw a policeman standing by the grounds of one of the larger houses she loitered near it, in her

anxiety, to look over the low garden wall. This seemed more likely than any other to be the place she sought; but as soon as she hesitated in her walk the policeman and a groom who talked to him looked at her curiously, and Star walked briskly on. How could she stay? Yet as she went away she felt that she must come back to this place at any risk. She made a circuit, and came by again, always walking as if she had some place to go to. This little feint and her appearance were her safeguard.

The policeman had gone when she passed again. The groom still lounged by the gate and gave a long, low whistle as she passed. Star's pulses stopped at the sound. She thought at first he was watching for the thief, and this might be a signal to fellow-watchers that something suspicious was seen. A moment later she knew that the sound had merely been an impudent attempt to attract her own attention. Again she had no resource but to hurry away from the spot she wished most to watch.

Deep night had settled on the place. The household lights, which had shone in the windows like the warm glow of humanity, were in most places gone. Star passed by one shadowy abode after another—pretentious villa and humble cot—and, although to her, in her excitement, mysterious forms and sounds were rife, she saw nothing that really seemed to call for her attention so much as the place from which she had twice been driven by fear. She mustered courage, and by the main street returned to it a third time. Now all was silent. She stood by the paling and looked in at the dimly discerned shapes of lawn, shrubbery, and house. It was probably a comfort-

able family home, and the dark precincts its pleasure ground. How removed from all region of pleasure it appeared to her—black, mysterious, chill with the midnight air! Something rustled near her. It was only the wind in a climbing rose bush, and the heavily scented, dewy flowers waved near her face. She recognized them as roses by that sense which often seems more potent than any other to stir a sleeping memory and bring back other scenes. All the happy hours in which heretofore she had smelt roses seemed to join hands, like sad, sweet spirits, and dance around her. The pathos of their presence brought hot tears to her eyes for the first time that day.

The church clock, for which she was listening with nervous care, struck twelve. And now, wherever Hubert might be—at that house or another, or away from Croom altogether—she must travel to Liverpool if she did not wish to lose that other hope of seeing him there. She had almost lost all faith in her own power to divine his plans or search him out, yet, as she walked the lonely road to the station, she looked mechanically on all sides to see if Hubert might not be coming to travel with her.

She was astonished that the men about the station regarded her with so little interest and suspicion. She did not know that it is more by what a woman is than by what she does that the world at large judges. When the train was signalled the porter in charge was assiduous to find her a carriage. Star was only anxious to see who else might be getting in; it was *possible*, even yet, that Hubert might come in guilty flight. She tarried to the last, looking up and down the lighted platform into the darkness at either end. A person did come—a man

in a heavy coat and turned-up collar—and her heart beat quick. She felt sure, the one moment she had to act in, that it was Hubert. She was very brave and left the door the porter held open and followed the stranger into his carriage. The man was not Hubert. Both he and the porter looked with surprise at her. Then she shrank overwhelmed by shame and fear. She felt that a merciful Providence had preserved her thus far, and that now, by an act of folly, she had compromised herself—as if, poor child, her best wisdom were so much above her folly that Providence would change in attitude for that.

The porter was left behind by the hastening train, and Star's fellow-traveller got out at the next station. She was alone, to be rattled through the chill, small hours of the night—alone in the dimly lit carriage, alone with her hopelessness and despondency.

In the morning, when her courage was fresh and the sun shone, she had been sure that God was her guide; now it seemed to her that God was callous, or she too weak and silly to find His favour.

She would go on to the bitter end; she would search the hotel and the ship; but she felt sure that she should not find Hubert now. All that she had done had been worse than futile; she was convinced that what she would yet attempt would be in vain.

It is well for us that heaven is not a thing of our moods.

CHAPTER XV.

THE train was a slow one. It was morning when Star reached Liverpool. The great station was half-deserted; the wind blew through it coldly. Star found a waiting-room at one end where she might stay until the outside light and the rumble of many wheels should make it safer for her to set out in the strange city.

When that time came she inquired her way, and walked to the small inn to which Tod had directed her. It was a long way, and she twice took the wrong turning, so she was not there too early. Her teeth were almost chattering with cold. All her life seemed at a low ebb; she expected little. It was rainy and cold.

She went into the bar of the inn and asked if her husband was there.

Yes, the waiter she addressed thought there was such a visitor. He referred to a slate hanging on the wall.

“Mr. H. Kent,” had she said?

All Star’s pulses jumped into full life again—the full, trembling, excited life of a girl in love.

“He is my husband,” she said simply. “Please show me to his room.”

The man called through a speaking tube to somebody to take a lady to number thirty-four, and to tell the gentleman that the ’bus that would take him to the docks started in an hour.

Star went up the staircase and found a boy waiting

for her. He led through a long passage. The meaning of the message about the omnibus came to her.

"Does the ship sail so early?" she asked.

"They got a message downstairs that she'd go early," the boy replied. "I've called the gen'l'man already."

Star's heart beat against her side. Only one hour in which to try to turn Hubert's purpose! But that thought was lost in the other—he had, then, really intended to desert her; would he be pleased to see her now? A great bashfulness came over her, greater than all else except this—the joy that she had found him.

The boy thumped on a door. Hubert's voice replied sharply that he had been called, that he had ordered breakfast.

"A lady wants to see you," called the boy.

Hubert opened the door and looked out crossly. When he saw Star he was evidently moved.

"Hubert, let me in."

He let her come in, and the boy went away. It was a small, bare room, dull and chilly. Hubert was nearly dressed.

"Oh, Hubert!" said Star.

"Well?" he said, surveying her.

Yet, as he said it, she felt that, under this well-known cool manner of his, unusual feeling was stirring. She did not know what feeling; she did not know how to meet what she could not estimate. They stood for a few minutes awkward, uncertain, as children or animals stand, without manners or power of expression.

She had thought when she had been alone at home that she should fall at his feet and lavish caresses upon them as she besought him. For some reason now that

became impossible. It seemed to her at first impossible to make any advance; then, as she waited, she remembered the cheerful outset of their married love, and she put her arms round his neck.

“Oh, Hubert, Hubert,” she sobbed, “I love you.”

He looked down distressed, inquiring.

She leaned her face against him. “I love you—I love you, Hubert.”

“But,” he said, “not so much that you would be willing to live peaceably in my way, and let me do as I like?”

She felt, as she clasped him in that large embrace, that, while meeting her passion with quiet question, his words came out of an emotion as strong as her own.

“Come back and stay with me, Hubert. I have scolded you when I had better have implored you. I have tried to hate you when I only love you. Stay with me now.”

“What is the use of all this?” he asked half sullenly, putting her from him. He did not look at her, but averted his face. “Do you think it was easy to leave you, that you come and make it worse?”

“Why did you leave me, Hubert?” Her voice was very pathetic.

“I told you why,” he said.

She looked her blank perplexity.

He explained a little further, but gruffly. “Your mother had more of a pull over me than I calculated on.” He paused a moment, as if taking time for surprise that, in the matter of his marriage, his reckoning should have failed in the slightest. “I’ll leave you to be pious her way.”

It was all the explanation she could get from him. He had, in very truth then, run away from all he liked best out of favour to the dead. She did not take in all the bearings of the fact at the time; in a conversation one so often misses the force of what is revealed in the hurry of talk.

She only said, in great depression of heart, "I will be religious in mother's way, Hubert. Let me try to earn my own living and Richarda's, and we will live with you and love you all the same; and then, if you get into trouble, I can share it."

"You would never cease to tease me about it."

"No, I would never cease to beg you to give it up—never, never. I would love you always."

"Don't you see, Star, we should never be comfortable. It is better to be away from each other." He spoke a little hoarsely. "Sit down," he said; and she sat down on a cane chair by the wall.

"Won't you stay with me?" Her sad voice trembled.

He did not answer at once. Perhaps he wanted to clear his voice; perhaps he wanted time to think. He put his foot up on another chair and laced his shoe.

"I am not a brute," he began. "I feel that this is a sad business. You think I don't care; but I do."

"I don't think that."

"Yes, you do. You think that, because I do certain things you think wrong, I am fit to do anything. That's the way with all you religious people, and it's the way to make me worse than I am." That was his grievance. When he had expressed it, he went on in a less aggrieved tone. "I shall be better away; and you won't be further contaminated. Of course I can't stay now. I

have got my passage. I've got the promise of a situation on a newspaper in New York. I've given up all I had to do at home."

"May I come with you?"

"No. You can't leave Richarda, and she's not fit to travel. I don't know how I shall get on in New York yet. You might starve if I took you; and besides, for what I've said already, it's better we should separate."

"And you thought of going without saying good-bye to me, Hubert?"

"Oh, hang it!" he said. He was lacing his other shoe by this time, and the lace had broken. Perhaps that caused the words. In a minute he answered her reproach, "If I must go—and I've told you why—why should I give you the trouble of saying good-bye? It's no use talking. Besides, how was I to know you cared particularly?" He moved to the looking-glass to put on his collar.

"Hubert," she cried, "I know I behaved unkindly. Two wrongs cannot make a right. I am sorry. You believe me when I say I love you. I *love* you, Hubert."

She felt he would despise her for senselessly repeating the same thing. She thought she would have shown greater goodness had she argued cleverly. Our ideals are often false. She saw in the glass that his face was white, as if he were suffering. She was going to beg him to stop dressing and talk to her, when she saw him take up his watch to look at it. Then again the comparison between that which is real and that which may be dreamed of came over her, as it had sometimes come before, showing the greater pathos of the reality. For she would have thought that, after coming so far with

such a burden of love and a message of righteousness given her to deliver, she would have had some quiet, some suitable surroundings in which to reason, to entreat, and to caress the man she wished to move. And now the bald reality, the cold, dingy room, the need to dress and eat and take the journey to the docks, the pressing fact that time and tide wait not!

“I suppose you must make haste if you are to get any breakfast?” she said.

“I don’t want breakfast, but I may as well get ready.”

She saw he did not want to turn towards her. Her own eyes grew dim with tears. She sat wiping them away quietly. She tried not to tease him by weeping.

In a minute he said, “But have *you* had breakfast? Where have you come from? Who told you I was here? When did you come?”

She knew now that all her effort had been in the wrong direction. When thinking she followed the heavenly light she had followed only the will-o’-the-wisp of her own fancy. If she was there to influence him to accept her faith, to act as she judged best, surely to tell him all she had done would be to tell a tale with the wrong lesson; yet now, sitting there crying weakly in the presence of the husband she loved, she felt that it would be a relief to her to tell him.

So she began from the time when he left her, and told him all that she had thought and felt and done—how she had prayed to know what to do, and of the alarm in the paper which had seemed like a clear direction; told him tearfully with what hope and confidence she had set out the previous day, and how meaningless the day’s

occurrences had been ; she told about the blue pork, her contest with the wife-beater, her powerlessness to console or help the unfortunate wife ; she told him of her daring walk across the hill, of her futile watch in Croom, and the troubles of her night journey. She told it all in short, weak sentences, keeping down her eyes, which were blurred with tears. And Hubert stood staring at her, hair-brush in hand. She could not see him for her slow-dropping tears.

“ You did not go to Croom at all, Hubert ? ”

He slowly changed the position of preoccupied astonishment in which he regarded her, but did not bring his attention to a prompt answer.

“ Did you ? ” she repeated.

“ No ; I had nothing to do at Croom. ”

“ But the paper said—— ”

“ People are idiots, ” cried he. “ It’s the third or fourth false alarm the police have got up, and if they let this get into the papers you might have been sure there was nothing in it. ”

“ Were you in London all the time till you came here ? ” she questioned in perfect despondency. What use to try to defend herself ?

“ No. ”

“ Where were you ? ”

“ I hope you’ve given up the nonsensical idea of not being friends with Miss Gower ? ”

She looked up with clearer eyes now, but he had turned.

“ She understood your letter. She came to me and destroyed it. She said it would be as if it had not been written. Hubert, did you do it because you did not

want to leave me without comfort? Did you know my heart was breaking and that I would not tell any one?"

"Oh," he said—it was a vague sort of "oh," disclaiming any strong feeling—"it was easy to see how much you set by Miss Gower, and, as you live near her, you might as well be chummy. I did not do anything to endanger myself. She couldn't have made anything against me out of the letter if she'd tried."

"I think it was wonderfully thoughtful of you, dear."

Something in the attitude of Hubert's shoulders made her repeat her remark. A tiny gleam of hope she could not understand was instilled into her heart.

"I will say this, Star, you're the sort of girl I took you for at first, after all. You've pluck enough to do anything and lie low about it too. It seems I didn't guess wrong that far. I hate to think I've ever made a mistake."

The pathetic egotism of it!

"Oh, Hubert," was all she could say.

"And I don't mind telling you you weren't altogether off the scent. I did spend a night with Montagu on my way from London. I didn't mean to, but I found I couldn't quite get on without setting eyes on you again."

"Did you do it just on purpose to see me?" Her swollen eyelids opened a little wider.

"Well—yes; that was the reason. I saw you twice, and when I found you were taking it to heart I wrote that nonsense to Miss Gower. It was weak of me, I dare say; but, at least, you can't say I haven't done all I could to leave you comfortable."

She felt a flutter of joy in the midst of her misery,

such as a maiden feels when she sees with surprise that a man will do much merely for her sweet sake.

“You saw me! Did you pass in his clothes, Hubert?”

“Never mind what I did. If I occasionally give Montagu a sleeping cup and light his lamps for him it would not do for any one to know it.”

“No,” Star agreed.

“I was there yesterday morning when that idiot of a woman looked in the window for you. I thought you smelt the trick then, and that it was pretty sharp of you, so I made a business of getting off as fast as I could.”

She asked him how he could go out and in at Montagu’s cabin with the new neighbours there.

“I went in at night, but when I wanted to come out yesterday it was rather more ticklish. When she was outside with the children I managed to get on the back side of Montagu’s roof, and, by squinting down her chimney, I shied some washing blue he had into her pot. I calculated that the dismal surprise of finding it there would come about the time I wanted to walk off. I’m sorry he beat her, but I had to get away. It’s my principle, you know, that you can do anything under people’s noses if you only distract their attention.” He paused, packing his handbag, and stood up as a man stands upright to think a great thought. “That’s my theory of work, and a grand one it is too. There’s nothing one couldn’t do in this world by using it cleverly.”

The flickering flame of Star’s hope died down. It seemed to her to go black out, but in a moment it kindled faintly.

“It’s more in the cleverness than in the theory.

You are very clever, Hubert, and you are very young. You might do wonderful things in other ways with your cleverness, or you might go on using it to help you steal" (she was going to add, "and that might get you into the worst trouble," but she knew the risk was half the sweetness of the temptation, so she left that out); "but you must give that up."

"Indeed! Why?"

She took breath, choosing her words. "Because, whatever you gained that way, you would lose your soul."

"Haven't any," he replied flippantly; "but I'll lose *you*, and that's what weighs with me a good deal more. If I've made up my mind to that you may be sure I won't change."

"No, you can't lose me; whatever you do I will belong to you and love you. You can make me miserable, or you can make me happy; but you can't lose me, Hubert."

"Oh, you'd soon forget me," he said. "It's human nature."

"Yes; but mother believed that to love people rightly we had to pray for *God's nature* every day to make us love them more; and I will do that. You don't dare to say that He won't answer me. Mother used to say that, when the Bible says we should not do wrong because of vexing God, it does not mean that He would desert us, but it is because He never would, never could, stop loving us that it is important not to grieve Him. You don't care whether God loves you or not, Hubert; but you don't dare to say He won't make me love you the way He loves."

She stopped, out of breath with her ardour. Her

words had been suddenly born within her; she did not know that she was going to give them birth. She had learnt more than she was aware of in her days of sorrow.

Hubert had snapped the lock of his bag, and having grazed his finger slightly, he stood now with part of it in his mouth.

“Come,” he said in a minute, “I’m ready, and as you haven’t had any breakfast, you’d better come down and have some with me now.”

He took up his heavy bag and traps with one hand, with the other he took hold of her hand, and, hanging his arm in a rather shamefaced way so that no one could see he held her, he led her out of the room and down the passage.

“There’s no use talking,” he said as they went. “Your mother and her sort may be in the right of it, and that’s more than I would have said before I knew her, but I can’t change now.”

When past and future are too great to grapple with it is wonderful how the moment’s contents press. The breakfast was not dainty. They sat down at the end of a long table. The cloth was soiled, the butter cheap, the eggs and tea cold. Her great distaste of the place, her instinctive effort to make this last meal not wholly uncomfortable to him, seemed to Star all she thought of just then. It seemed truly of little use to think, when all she had said seemed to her feeble, and he, she thought, had taken no notice.

He made her eat something. He was kind and quiet. They were obliged to make a hurried exit from the inn to take the omnibus down to the dock. There was a

man, his wife, and their small family in it. The children, disposed to fret, had their mouths stopped with gingerbread. Hubert, not pleased with the interior view, tried, out of the low window, to point out to Star some of the principal streets. The rain had ceased, but the morning was still chill and damp.

When they reached the dock there was some waiting and standing about. The family who ate gingerbread had intermediate tickets. Star discovered that Hubert belonged to the first cabin. There was not much luxury in that, for it was a small ship of one of the cheaper lines. Among the first-class passengers there were some young ladies, and a clerical relative was seeing them off. There were some commercial travellers, and a variety of nondescript individuals of both sexes. When they were at last gathered on the tender that was to take them to the ship Hubert and Star sat down side by side on the narrow bench that skirts the deck of such small boats.

The ship lay only a short distance away. There were many vessels of all sorts about. The sea was gray; the sky was gray. The granite docks, with their long lines of shed roofs, were almost colourless. The red funnels of the steamboats scarce repeated their hue in the heaving, oily water. White sea birds circled and mewed; sailors shouted at each other. The luggage was put down on the deck of their tender with dull thuds of sound. The young ladies chattered to each other with some enthusiasm; the clergyman made jokes. Star and Hubert sat quite near them. There was no place where they could sit apart.

Then the boat moved away from the dock. Every

moment now was bringing them nearer the ship, nearer the near moment of parting. Hubert looked at his wife by hasty, unnoticed glances. The dumb misery of her sweet face went to his heart as no speech would have done. She had not obtruded upon him any thought of her own comfort or well-being in his absence, but he thought of the strange tale she had told him, of her search in the previous night. He could not withhold his compassion.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said—he spoke low, he was obliged also to pretend by his manner not to be saying anything particular—“I’ll promise you this, that all I send you will be got as you like, and, since Miss Gower’s your friend, I’ll pay back old Gower anonymously and with interest.”

There was a pause. The sea breeze blew dull upon them. They both looked before them at the pile of luggage.

“So you can know that what you have is—well, all you want it to be. That certainly ought to satisfy you. Will you promise in return to do as I asked you in my letter?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s be a little cheerful then.”

She spoke slowly. Her voice seemed to her to have no expression; she felt obliged to speak with such guarded indifference of manner to avoid attention. “Now that you have said that, I will live exactly as you want; but that can’t satisfy me; you must promise either to send for me soon to come out and live with you or come back to me.”

“What earthly use is it to go over and over

things?" he asked. "I said I had given up dragging you to my way of thinking."

She heard him grind his firm, white teeth against one another. She looked in some surprise to see how very haggard his face was.

"You would not drag me down," she said, "if you would pay back all the money with interest and would live the right way. Won't you, Hubert? I can never be happy till you do. Won't you promise?"

He muttered a profane word. "I shall have to slave like a nigger to do what I've said already."

He got up and stood in another part of the boat, looking out on the water. She thought he would come back, but he did not. At last she went to him.

"Hubert," she said, "Miss Gower can get me some work to do at home, that will at least help in saving the money. We will both work, and God will give you patience, and perhaps He will give you good luck in America, if you ask Him. Won't you promise to pay it all back, Hubert, and give up that way? If you do I shall be happy working near Miss Gower and Richarda; and you will be happy to know that you are coming back, and when you come it will be so joyful."

"I can't," he said impatiently. "I'll think about it, if you like, but I can't promise."

"Yes, you can. It only depends on yourself. Please promise."

"Oh," he said, "you don't know how hard it would be. There would be the wanting to gull people tugging at me all the time."

As he said this he looked suddenly younger, more like the frank boy he had sometimes appeared in the

first scenes of his courtship, when her sweetness had surprised him with the knowledge that there was something more in the cold world than he had hitherto known. She felt the change. She pressed closer to him, her hands crossed on her breast like a suppliant. Above her self-consciousness the spirit of her supplication was supreme, dominating all else in her. She had but one moment, and yet she could not find words at first; her eyes, her whole attitude, spoke her entreaty.

Poor child, perhaps all her agonized prayer for help, which had not seemed to be answered in her foolish wanderings of the day before, was answered now, for she spoke not knowing what she would say.

“Oh, Hubert, mother would say you must get hold of God’s help to overcome wrong. Promise me, Hubert, that you will find some way of getting hold of His help and doing what I ask.”

She looked so piteous, so lovable, in her passionate love for him, that just at that moment he found he could not withstand her longer, and, not realizing till after he had spoken that she had changed the form of her request, he yielded. He supposed that it was not the strongest noblest part of him that yielded, but only a husband’s natural softness to the wife he loved in the moment of her extreme distress. Yet he gave the promise—this man who had an iron will and prided himself that he had never yet broken a promise.

The gangway had been laid from the boat to the ship. The luggage had been shifted. The ship was in haste because of the tide. The hands of the sailors were already on the rope of her anchor.

They gave each other one hasty kiss—these two,

with strained faces and cold lips. They dare not look in each other's eyes, or they could not have parted. Only when the boat and ship had separated, across the fast-widening space of water they looked again for one another's faces, and she gave him a smile of hopeful love. It reminded him of her mother's dying smile, and he knew that it was some new life in him that struggled bravely to smile in answer.

Star went home. The train which carried her out of the murky city ran afterwards through fields of ripening grain; the sun shone out upon her homecoming.

Marian never heard the story of Star's parting from her husband, but with affection, touched into purest sympathy by the light of her new vision of life, she was able to guide Star's love of work to the awakening of hope in the hearts of those to whom life had hitherto brought little of its highest.

And Star loved Hubert, and waited.

THE END.

